# A Comparison of American and Vietnamese Soldiers in the Vietnam Conflict

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Rochelle Strang

Thesis Advisor
Anthony Edmonds

Ball State University

Muncie, Indiana

May 1997

Expected Date of Graduation
May 10, 1997

Special
LD
2489
.E4
1991
.S77



Purpose of Thesis

This comparison of the experience of communist Vietnamese and American soldiers will use factual references to one American Marine's interview which will be parallelled with various material from Vietnamese soldiers. This material ranges from poetic memoirs, novels written by Vietnamese people who experienced the war first hand, and nonfiction compilations of experiences of the Vietnamese. This discussion focuses on the entire process of war for both sides. It begins with the reasons that the soldiers felt moved to go to war and follows them through the war and those experiences and concludes with the process of coming home and readjusting to civilian lives. This comparison attempts to demonstrate the vast differences and many significant similarities between the American soldiers and the Vietnamese soldiers.

The Vietnam War saw many intense conflicts between two very different entities. North Vietnamese, Vietcong, and American soldiers were greatly different in geography, culture, and physical aspects, but the irony in this situation may be that these two peoples shared many similarities. These similarities may only have directly resulted from the war they were involved in, but they are nonetheless very significant. This correlation will be made using Ralph Strang, a Marine infantryman, as the representative American soldier. In comparing Ralph with a Vietnamese soldier the relationship will be formed from compilations of memoirs of real soldiers, novels written by Vietnamese people who either fought in the war or experienced it directly, and the poetic journals of real Vietnamese soldiers. In referring to "Vietnamese" soldiers, I mean Vietcong and North Vietnamese, not South Vietnamese. The whole process of war will be explored from both perspectives beginning with the background of the soldiers including the family influence and the first idea of going to war. The actual entry to war will be dealt with, and following that will be the training that the soldiers received upon entry to the military. Next, the many aspects related to combat experience will be discussed along with the results of these experiences. I will conclude by dealing with the return home and the changes that occurred because of

what happened to the soldiers somewhere in between deciding to go to war and coming home from that war.

The political atmosphere in both Vietnam and the United States was somewhat insecure. The Americans were involved heavily in the Cold War which clouded their perspective of most world events at that time. The vast fear of Communism and the desire to rid the world of this idea was very strong throughout the Vietnamese conflict. The North Vietnamese and Vietcong were powerful supporters of the Nationalist and Communist ideals, but most of the world was not content with allowing them to follow their ideas. That is one reason why the Vietnamese were in a constant state of conflict, mostly military, and had been for hundreds of years. They were used to the struggles with Asian countries nearby and countries in Europe like France, which had been attempting domination for decades. In 1954 when France was expelled the country of Vietnam was split into North Vietnam which followed the communist ideal and South Vietnam which did not. This combination of instability was dangerous for all involved parties. The United States sought to crush the Communist menace in the world and were willing to get involved in others' affairs just to follow their own beliefs and desires. The goal here is not to delve into all of the reasons for the Vietnamese and American conflict, but some

background is necessary to gain the proper perspective. The Vietnamese were just recovering from a struggle with the French in which the Vietnamese were triumphant in that they gained independence from the French, but they were, at the same time, overwhelmed internally with political unrest and upheavals. One Vietnamese soldier saw the duty of the young Vietnamese as much different from that of their ancestors. The mission for him was to be able to allow his country to live as they desired without the imposition of the larger and more dominant countries with their beliefs. He felt given a mission and he explains it in the following way:

> history didn't entrust them with the same mission. . . . We're doing something greater. Our victory won't be just that of a tiny country against the imperialists. It will also be a Marxist victory. Only Marxism can help us to build communism on Earth, to realize the dream (Duong, 76).

This is what the Americans feared the most at this time, Communism, the Red Menace. From the view point of the United States, Americans were helping the Vietnamese to be free of that formidable system. The problem was that the country of Vietnam was not unified; the Vietnamese were not sure what they wanted or needed. They looked to what sounded best for

their country and people, and this was what they would pursue. From the limited perspective of a citizen they frequently made choices that did not look closely enough into the future and the system that they had to deal with. Many times this led a great number of the Vietnamese to follow the Communist path.

Another significant context that influenced men and boys from both sides to become soldiers was their family. In the case of Ralph Strang, his father had been a marine, and most of the older men he knew were involved in the military and participated in World War II. Ralph had no verbal pressure or encouragement, but many people did. In Vietnamese culture the reasons for fighting were very different. It was not really a choice if a young Vietnamese was eligible for the draft. He had to protect home and family. It was not like the Americans who had little personal interest in the results of the war. Here are the words of wisdom one Vietnamese father used to put the idea of pacifism into perspective for his young son venturing to war with the Americans:

> I just want you to understand me when I say that a human being's duty on this earth is to live, not to kill. . . . I want you to guard against all those who demand that you die just to prove something. It is not that I advise you to respect your life more

> than anything else, but for you not to die uselessly for the needs of others (Bao, 53).

Another opposing idea was put forth by the same soldier's Mother, "Then one day you'll become a real man. So harden your heart and be brave, my son" (Bao, 114). These opposing views of violence are present in different degrees for all people, so it is very difficult to generalize from one soldier's experience what other soldiers heard and felt and the reasons why his fellow countrymen fought.

Political influences were very strong motivators, especially in Vietnam. The United States was deeply afraid of the Communist threat they felt was everywhere, but in the personal lives of the American soldiers, not many significant issues existed that were in the forefront of their reasoning for going to war. For the Vietnamese in this war there were many reasons for fighting. One Vietnamese soldier put his feelings about the purpose of the war like this:

> The war was not simply another war against foreign aggression; it was also our chance for a resurrection. Vietnam had been chosen by history: After the war, our country would become humanity's paradise. Our people would hold a rank apart. At least we would be respected, honored, revered. We

believed this . . . (Duong, 31).

For the United States, the reason for fighting was ideological. The Americans believed that Communism was a poison, not just for the United States, but for the whole world. This rationale caused the Americans to fear the spread of Communism into the safe haven that had been established for them in the United States with freedom and democracy. Many Americans felt that they could not give even an insignificant Southeast Asian country away or the whole world would soon follow. It would just be a matter of time.

The culmination of all of these motivators is the personal view that individual soldiers held after taking in and processing the external influences previously mentioned like the political atmosphere and the family leverage. All of the ideas that they had heard from birth were insignificant until they processed them together and formed their own reasoning. The Vietnamese had more motivation than the Americans to fight. They were protecting their homeland from this huge capitalist country that was wielding its power without many of the Vietnamese people's permission. One of the main issues for the North Vietnamese was reunification. They desired that the North and the South be one. The basic need to have the strangers out of the country was also strong. If they

expelled the Americans, they would have restored the peace that they so longed for, peace between their own people and even a peace with other countries. Honor has also been a very strong ideal for the Vietnamese people, and removing the oppressor would uphold their honor to remove these oppressors. Ralph Strang felt no pressure from his family to enlist, but he felt that it was his obligation to the United States. This obligation stemmed from one basic idea: "I felt when I was growing up that the reason I had everything I, all the freedoms I had, and all that, was because of this country" (Strang Interview). Obviously, the Communists in Vietnam were no immediately direct threat to the United States, but in many American's eyes there was the imminent threat of Communism pervading the continent, so all of the smaller and less developed countries deserved protection too. The significance of the war was much more personal to the Vietnamese who were in many cases fighting in their own village whereas the Americans were strangers to this area, and there was not quite as much at stake.

Some of the similarities between the Vietnamese and the American soldiers come into play when one begins to look at the more concrete aspects of the war. The age ranges on both sides were similar. The Vietnamese soldiers were mostly in their late teens and early twenties,

just as most of the Americans were. Ralph Strang was nineteen when he enlisted, and he celebrated his twentieth and twenty first birthdays in Vietnam. The officers and politicians were older, but the actual combat soldiers were usually quite young.

The process of enlistment was quite different, however. The draft was in place in both countries at the time of Ralph Strang's entry to war. Ralph was exempt from the draft because he was enrolled in college, but he wanted to join the Marine Corps and fight in Vietnam. His family history and feelings of patriotism that he had felt since birth played a major part in this decision, especially in deciding to go into the Marines. His father had been a Marine in World War II, and he wanted to follow that lead. Ralph simply had to do go to the local recruitment office and voice his interest. Initially, in the summer of 1966, he was rejected by the Marines after his physical because of the severe acne on his back; the climate in Vietnam was such that it would have worsened and then he might not have been able to carry his pack. The next summer, after a year at Butler University, he tried again and was accepted because "they needed people in South Vietnam to replace all of the dead guys and the wounded guys . . ."(Strang Interview). For the Vietnamese the process was a little different. Those of the eligible age for the draft, sixteen, were to go

register in the first five days of January of the year that they became eligible. They were then called in for health screenings and sent home to await induction the following December (Lanning & Cragg, 39). Both countries were very desperate for bodies to fight, so they were eager to recruit the draftees and volunteers that were going to fight for their cause.

Once the soldiers had enlisted, various kinds of training were needed. Most soldiers from both sides became very skilled fighters whether they had intense pre-combat instruction or just in-the-field training. Ralph was sent to San Diego, California, for his combat education. The first week for the Americans consisted mostly of medical testing to ensure good health for the trials they would face in training and actual battle. In the nine weeks, he learned skills like marching, shooting, following orders, and avoiding traps and enemies in artificial villages that were set up at the camp. The importance of physical fitness was emphasized on both sides. The Americans were always running or marching wherever they went at camp, while the Vietnamese would walk for a couple hours every evening with heavy loads of 45 to 70 pounds strapped to them (Lanning & Cragg, 44).

Basic training concentrated on combat-readiness for both Americans and North Vietnamese. United States Marines spent three of the nine

weeks at Camp Pendleton in California focusing just on rifle training. To Ralph, the old saying about a Marine and his rifle being the deadliest weapon became a reality because his drill sergeants were so emphatic about firing capability. The Vietnamese who were going to be sent to South Vietnam were given special training with the American weapons because they were able to gain access to their weapons often. They also had training with moving targets and firing at night (Lanning & Cragg, 43). The Americans, on the other hand, had little training with nighttime maneuvers, but such tactics were not taken very seriously because the recruits were practicing safely within the perimeters of their camp.

One significant difference in training was that the Vietnamese had a special section of training dedicated to "political indoctrination" classes. They spent two weeks learning why they were fighting (Lanning & Cragg, 42). For example, they learned that, "The soldier's supreme duty is to fight on the side of the Revolution. The Revolution has given independence to one half of the country, but there still remains the other half" (Lanning & Cragg, 41). They were given reasons to fight and made politically aware. The only psychology, or mind work, involved for Ralph was "the mental part that they do to you when they are trying to break you down into nothing and then build you back up into somebody who will follow orders

without question." The instructors at boot camp were very intent on making the Marines in training feel as if they were worthless on their own, but if they did what they were supposed to in the Corps then they were going to be "the baddest guy[s] on the block" (Strang interview).

Training came in many forms and took place in many locations. The Americans had military installations throughout the United States and the world, but Ralph Strang was stationed in California for training, mainly at the San Diego Marine Corps Recruit Depot and some at Camp Pendleton. Ralph also received some instruction in Okinawa, after he had completed training in the United States and was on the way to Vietnam to experience an environment similar to the places they would soon be in fighting real battles. Many of the North Vietnamese regular Army men were trained in military bases in their own country, but there were also some who were not given that luxury and first learned how to fight in battle (Lanning & Cragg, 42). This was especially true with the Vietcong, and the villagers who appeared to support the South Vietnamese, but were really North Vietnamese sympathizers. They were scattered and not easily trained in a structured environment (Lanning & Cragg, 53).

The importance of this training was demonstrated by the duration of time that was spent in instructing the troops. The preparation was a

crucial aspect of winning, and both sides put tremendous effort into basic training. The Americans usually had a twelve week, or three month, span of training, but at one point they were so desperate for new troops that they cut back to a nine week training. Ralph was in one of the groups to be given this abbreviated training (Strang Interview). Similarly, the Vietnamese were usually trained for three months (Lanning & Cragg, 41). If in special services, they could receive more, some even eleven months of training before going to battle (Lanning & Cragg, 44). So the duration of training varied somewhat, but for the most part Americans and Vietnamese alike received at least two to three months.

The effectiveness of this training is debateable for both sides. As mentioned earlier, Ralph was trained in Southern California where there is a moderate climate and low humidity. The Marines tried to set up mock villages, but they could not possibly create the same environment in California that existed in Vietnam. The short training troops received in Okinawa was more accurate, but most of the training was not done there in the more representative climate (Strang Interview). Even the North Vietnamese did not get the appropriate training for the jungles of South Vietnam. They provided no special emphasis on jungle warfare or survival training. They developed these tactics only after they were sent to this

new region (Lanning & Cragg, 45).

Upon arrival in South Vietnam, these newly-trained soldiers experienced new sensations, the most obvious of which especially for the Americans was the vast difference of their location from any place they had ever been before. For Ralph there were a few very significant differences that he noticed within moments of stepping off of the plane in Da Nang:

> The first thing I noticed was the smell. When they opened the plane . . . was the smell. It was wood smoke. It was hot, wet, just diesel fuel from us being there with all our trucks . . . And it was just a very strange smell. It got to be where the wood smoke smell out in the villes at night when we were running patrols was a real comforting thing, you know. It reminded you of home if you had a fireplace, and if you didn't it still reminded you of home. But the smell was really really noticeably different from anything you had ever smelled before (Strang Interview).

Another, more shocking difference was in the people and some of their habits. Shortly after landing, he saw a woman use the bathroom in the middle of the street. This was a tremendous shock to this midwestern kid

who definitely was not used to this type of behavior. Surprisingly enough, this geographic disorientation was also shared by some Vietnamese soldiers. The North Vietnamese who were sent South were in a new area also. One soldier recalls, "But fighting in another village, even hand in hand with my comrades, is like fighting in a strange country" (Nguyen, 51). Though one group may have been closer to home, the feelings of being out of their familiar environment was mutual.

There were significant similarities in the living conditions of the soldiers from the two sides. They ate rationed food from their armies. The Americans could occasionally get fresh food, but the trust factor was an issue in whatever they received from the South Vietnamese. They were never sure if the South Vietnamese were supporting the Americans or if they were Vietcong who wanted the Americans dead. In both armies there were occasions where there were not enough rations to satisfy the soldiers. Vietnamese experienced the lack of food sometimes when the army would cut their rations. They would have to go hungry until conditions improved (Bao, 13). In one instance in Operation Allen Brook in May of 1968, Ralph and the men with him were welcomed back from running an operation with warm pop and hot bologna sandwiches that had gotten baked in the trucks by the sun. After gagging this down, they were

told that they were going back out, so they were given rations for two to three more days and sent back out. Ralph and his guys ate what they were given within moments of receiving it. For the next four to five days that they were on patrol, they had to get by with what they could find to eat. In desperation for food, they stooped to eating grass; and in one instance, they had found some ducks and their eggs which they immediately took advantage of. The desperation of the situation and the lack of resources led them to eat the duck raw, but Ralph was lucky enough to have gotten to eat the eggs, which they were able to cook (Strang Interview). The Vietnamese experienced this type of desperation also. In one instance there was a group of men who went out and hunted Orangutan. This they used to make a soup, which included as much as they could use, even the paws. For most of the men this was tolerable, but some could not handle this sustenance (Duong, 7).

Clothing was also interesting in the similarities and differences. When Ralph arrived and went to get his supplies from the supply hootch, "the guy says, 'Well, go out there's a pile of boots out back,' from everybody who'd been killed or wounded, and 'just pick out whatever size you need.'" The boots that he finally found were less than adequate because they had holes as big as silver dollars where his heel hit, but these

were his only pair of boots for the first seven months of his tour (Strang Interview). The North Vietnamese also had uniforms usually, unlike the Vietcong who often wore their regular clothes, which helped them evade being captured because they could pretend to be civilians (Lanning & Cragg, 102).

One result of the combination of lack of nourishment and the occasionally inadequate clothing was a great deal of illness. Much of the sickness was due to the climate and environment, and one disease that was prevalent for both sides was malaria. The American troops had pills that they were to take every day to prevent it, but they did not always follow this prescribed routine. At the time, it seemed that malaria could not be as bad as doing what they were doing, but those who caught the disease were soon humbled into realizing that malaria was much worse. The Americans also suffered from dysentery, dengue fever, and other short term illnesses. Much of this sickness resulted from drinking the water that had not been treated with the halazone tablets that troops were told to use to disinfect the water supply (Strang Interview).

There was a great deal of excitement in war, but combat was not constant. There was a lot of free time in between skirmishes. The jungle could be a boring place, but the soldiers found ways to keep themselves

entertained. Soldiers on both sides found time for card games and gambling. The Vietnamese would use stakes like cigarettes, food, photos of women, and whatever else of value they could find (Bao, 6). The Americans played for some of the same things, but they usually had plenty of money. They were being paid regularly for their service, but they had almost nowhere to spend their salary. Many people had families to support, so they would send home a portion of their earnings. But Ralph, like many other young men, was single and had no responsibilities at home. He actually was paying his parents for the last semester of school, but other than that, he had money to play with. One day when he had been out on patrol on a particularly hot day, he returned to find a friend of his, Paul Blotzer, waiting for his group to return. Ralph told Blotzer that he would pay him one hundred dollars for a glass of water. Blotzer brought him that glass of water, "so I paid him 100 bucks for that and I would have paid him more, but I owed a couple of hundred dollars to another guy who had loaned me some money. . . " (Strang Interview). Another occupation for many soldiers in Vietnam was drugs. The Americans had marijuana and heroin and others probably. The Vietnamese had canina, which is similar to marijuana (Bao, 9). Troops on both sides liked to get high to attempt to escape the harsh realities of war.

The war would have been unbearable for these soldiers if they had not had their buddies to fight, play, and mourn with. One Vietnamese soldier looked back to remember: "There had been also the laughing, the shouting, swearing, drinking, talking, and happy times. A lot of crying, too" (Bao, 110). Ralph described his friendships like this:

> The war put you together with people that maybe you wouldn't even talk to if you passed them on the street . . . But because you were all Marines and because you were all in a war and because you were all in the same outfit and all that, you got to be close, very close, because your life depended on them and their life depended on you (Strang interview).

One of Ralph's friends was Chet Cosgrove, Cozzie. Their friendship was a prime example of the buddy system in Vietnam. They would go out on patrols together, and they were both assigned to be "tail-end charlie," a term that referred to whoever had to walk at the back of the line while on patrol. Cozzie started out as "tail-end charlie," and Ralph was next to the last in front of Cozzie. In this position the end man had to walk backwards to be sure that no one was sneaking up behind them. So Ralph's responsibility was to keep track of Cozzie. They later traded places, and Cozzie had to keep an eye out for Ralph; but neither of them ever left the

other out in the jungle. This kind of trust and dependability was what the soldiers relied on each other for. Cozzie was also a great friend for entertainment. He and a friend from back home, Marko, could make this strange noise that they called a "seal call." Ralph said that it always made the other guys laugh, and for the soldiers this was a valuable release (Strang Interview).

There was a lot to experience in Vietnam outside of direct combat, but it seems that the aspect of the war that affected them the most was the short but intense times spent in violent contact with the enemy. The results of this experience for most were significant. The two sides fought very similarly in some ways because they had to figure out and use the other side's tactics against them. The most significant difference was that the Americans had access to massive firepower. Guerrilla tactics were used often in this conflict, though mainly by the Vietnamese. Remaining unseen and retaining the element of surprise was vital. The Vietnamese were known for their ability to appear and disappear quickly and in that way evading the American pursuit. One problem was that the Vietnamese had no central bases that the Americans could find. The Americans were always looking for the Vietnamese, and they never could find large concentrations of them. Thus the United States could never gain any real

ground. They continued to eliminate the enemy, but they could not kill enough to make a dent in the opposition. Ralph Strang put it like this:

> There were lots of different patrols and stuff, different areas, but basically we never gained any ground. We had our hill, and the enemy had everything else. We went out and tried to find them and chase them away and all that, but we never had any intention of staying out there . . . ;we were just there to fight the enemy, and there was a lot more enemy than there was of us and there was an unlimited supply of them and no matter how many of them we killed there was always ten times more waiting to come down and take their place (Strang Interview).

The Vietnamese and the Americans alike used the bunker as a key means of defense. At night that was the safest place to be. Whenever there was threat of attack or if the soldiers knew that they were going to be somewhere for any amount of time, they wanted to be secure. The Vietnamese were very strategic with their use of the bunker. They could have fighting holes, bunkers, and trenches to connect them done in one to two hours. They frequently used a system of two bunkers. The front trench could regroup while the rear trench waged battle. This was a very

effective system that led to much confusion for the American's who came upon them (Lanning & Cragg, 176). Bunkers were not foolproof in Ralph's experience. One night with an impending Vietnamese attack, the soldiers were told to dig in. Ralph and his two companions got prepared, and they dug a trench. A little while later news came that the Vietnamese troops were going to march right through their area. With little prompting, Ralph rethought their defensive attempts and with the help of his friends set to digging a very secure hole. It ended up being about six and a half feet deep and wide enough that all three of them could stand in it. They were ready for whatever the Vietnamese decided to throw at them. The next thing they knew they were told to move over three bunkers. This news came as a surprise and disappointment because of the time and effort they had put into their bunker, but they followed orders. After the firefight, in which the Vietnamese attacked but did not come directly through the Americans, Ralph and his friends went to survey the damage. They discovered that their original hole had received a direct hit, and the three guys who inherited it from them were all killed instantly. The hole was not infallible, but for the circumstances it was the best defense they had access to (Strang Interview).

For Ralph the psychological training he received proved to be of little

value. His first patrol was a night one with twelve Marines sent out: "It was dark, and real dark. It's not dark like in the states where, you know, the malls lit up over here, there's a little town over here that you can see on the horizon, or anything. I mean there's like nothing. It's just black until the sun shines." While on this first patrol, his unit was fired upon by a Vietnamese with a single shot rifle. This event shattered Ralph's ideas of how tough these twelve Marines were because there was one man with a little rifle going up against a group of Marines with access to massive firepower. This was a very humbling experience for him, one that made him realize that not all of their basic training had been completely accurate (Strang Interview).

In some ways the training that the soldiers had was not very applicable to the actual combat situations that they were faced with. As mentioned earlier, the Vietnamese were not necessarily provided with the necessary jungle training and survival training that they seemed so practiced at. They had to gain that knowledge from experience (Lanning & Cragg, 45). The American soldiers, on the other hand, received training for situations that they never faced in Vietnam. First, they were subjected to many types of booby traps that were not found in all areas. Ralph was stationed in a more agrarian area that had rice paddies and fields as

opposed to the jungle areas, so some of the things that they were taught to be familiar with in training were not even seen in their combat experience. Also, when in Okinawa the soldiers crawled through some courses at night and looked for the booby traps by feeling with their hands out in front of their faces, running them along the ground. Ralph never experienced this, and it just didn't seem like anything realistic for the situation (Strang Interview). The training could not possibly have covered all of the eventualities that the soldiers faced. As a whole, the training prepared the soldiers to fight, although it could not really prepare them for the experiences that went along with the fighting.

Although not necessarily fully prepared for this war, both sides experienced some the accidental occurrences which resulted in injury or death brought about by one's own side. Because of the nature of the guerrilla warfare, there was much room for error. In one case, Vietnamese were engaged in battle with some Americans, and in the midst of the confusion one man realized that the weapons returning fire sounded like their own. This led to the heart-wrenching realization that they were killing their own men (Duong, 81). On another occasion one man was fatally shot by one of his own men when he was mistaken for an orangutan (Duong, 19).

The Americans, in contrast, usually had more technical errors. One Sunday while Ralph was on Hill 10, there was a sudden and all-encompassing explosion. He hit the trench to prepare for more attacks when the Lieutenant came around and told everyone that it was just an accident. This might have been acceptable if no one had been hurt, but one of Ralph's friends, Jimmy Fesperman, was hit badly enough in the legs to have to go to Japan for a couple of months to heal. Also, a man in his tent was killed. This accident resulted from a bomb that was released mechanically from an American plane flying overhead. The bomb was a COFRAM, which caused a large explosion above ground followed by many little explosions. Another near accident that Ralph experienced occurred when a new person in their squad "wanted a spotter round out of a mortar to mark our position." The man ordered high explosives, but the squad leader, Wayne Rollins, wouldn't let him go through with this. The man who gave the order argued with Rollins until finally he said, "Well, I'll prove it to you." In replacement of the high explosives, Rollins ordered illumination instead. This illumination went off directly over the group's heads. If the new person had been allowed to follow through with his plan, they all would have been hit with some very serious explosives (Strang Interview).

Consistent with war, there was a significant amount of bad feelings between the opposing sides. The Vietnamese looked forward with all of their being to the time "when those American bastards leave" (Duong, 200). The Americans responded to the Vietnamese similarly. While being interviewed for Combined Action Platoon, or CAP unit, Ralph was asked what he thought about the Vietnamese people. His reply was, "Well, I think they are all trying to kill me." This was how the Americans had to respond to all Vietnamese because for the most part that was how the situation between them was, there was little distinction between the good and bad Vietnamese. On the other hand, Ralph had a change in his perspective. In training, the soldiers had been taught that the "enemy" was something that they had to destroy. When Ralph was first exposed to a dead Vietnamese, he found wallets, letters, and clean socks. The Vietnamese had the same needs as the Americans, as people. This discovery led Ralph to rethink his position, "I mean it was really, that was another awakening, I guess if you want to call it that, to when you found out these weren't just machines or things, but they were actually people, and that made it a lot different, too" (Strang Interview).

As a result of these combat and non-combat experiences, the soldiers had a lot of feelings and changes in attitudes, both positive and negative.

Fear was a very common feeling in reaction to these experiences. Ralph mentions the fear that he felt all of the time of being shot or blown up:

> Just being scared never went away, at least for me. Because I think if you ever got over being scared then you'd start doing stupid stuff, and get yourself killed or get somebody else killed. As long as you were afraid, and maybe that's not the right word, as long as you never lost that respect for what the other guy could do to you who was trying to kill you, then you were O.K. Then it wasn't so bad (Strang Interview).

The Vietnamese were subject to these fears also because they realized that "life in war is so short" (Ong, 5). One Vietnamese soldier during battle had panicked, froze, and urinated on himself when he was supposed to be raising the flag over the battle site. This was looked on with disgust because he had shown his cowardice that others probably felt, but did not reveal (Bao, 167). This reality was hard, but soldiers had to adjust.

The major experience that soldiers had to adjust to was losing friends and being surrounded by death. Ralph puts his reaction like this:

> And then you really start thinking seriously about what the hell you were doing over there when your first friends start dying. . . . but that was the first real firefight I was in, and after

> that when I realized that not only could people die that you just heard stories about, you know, how great they were and all that, but people could who you actually knew and cared about. Then it started to become a whole different deal. Then it was just surviving. Save your friends, you save yourself, and it didn't matter about anything else -- the United States, Mom, apple pie, the girl you left behind -- all that stuff was just for movies and books and all that. And the rest of it was just living form one second to the next and hoping that the seconds added up to minutes and hours and days and months, so you could go home (Strang interview).

The Vietnamese also experienced this reality of death. They thought of the battlefield as "the arena to almost certain death" (Bao, 12). Death of friends in battle was remembered in poems like this, "Like regret that moment of separation stays in our hearts . . . and now only this poem to remember our friendship" (Ky, 25). With the massive amounts of dying and killing that occurred in Vietnam, it was impossible to not be touched by death to some degree when one was there.

The politics of the war heavily influenced the attitudes of the soldiers. who often had theories and ideas about the policy of the war and

who it was for. One Vietnamese voiced the idea that

> he knew it wasn't true that young Vietnamese loved war. Not true at all. If war came they would fight, and fight courageously. But that didn't mean they loved fighting. No. The ones who loved war were not the young men, but the others like the politicians, middle-aged men with fat bellies and short legs. Not the ordinary people (Bao, 68).

Many Americans questioned the reasons for the war, also. Ralph questions the value of, "going over and fighting a war somewhere for no reason at all except to make money," or whatever the real goals of the politicians were (Strang Interview). This is a significant debate among veterans and non-veterans alike, which may never be concluded to everyone's satisfaction.

For many soldiers who survived the war, the final and sometimes most difficult step was going home. For some this was not the end of the war but the beginning yet another battle. For many it was a bittersweet ending. Some Americans, like Ralph, left knowing that the United States was not going to be successful in saving South Vietnam from the North, and the Vietnamese had very little to return to that did not show some sign of the devastation of war they had fought. For Ralph the journey home went like this:

> We got on the plane and it was just real quiet, you know, nobody was really saying anything because nobody believed it was really happening, I guess. But instead of a wild party, a dance band, and beer and all of that stuff, I mean there was nothing. We started taxiing down the runway, and the stewardess came on the phone, the radio thing there in the plane and said, "We're going home." And that was it, and I guess there wasn't enough beer or enough bands or enough anything else that they could have had there that meant more to us than what that stewardess said that night when we took off (Strang interview).

Because of the controversies involved in the politics of this war, the receptions for the soldiers varied. For the most part, on both sides the families were happy for the return of the soldiers, but sometimes the loves that they had left were not so eager for the return. One Vietnamese soldier went home to find "the divine war had paid him for all his suffering and losses with more suffering and losses at home" (Bao, 76). His true love had found another. Society was not as kind as the families. The same soldier recalls the reception he felt from his community:

> There had been no trumpets for the victorious soldiers, no

> drums, no music. That might have been tolerated, but not the disrespect shown them. The general population just didn't care about them. Nor did their own authorities (Bao, 72-73).

Ralph also could have received a less than welcome return, but he missed out on the war protestors in the States because he returned to a military airport and from there went home to South Bend, which has a very small airport. He "didn't see any of those protest people and nobody spit on me or threw garbage on me or called me anything bad or anything like that, when I got there." He was lucky. He recalls, as the Vietnamese soldier reported, "no bands, no parades, no speeches, no anything like that. I was alive. I was sitting on the only souvenir or medal or anything else that made any difference to me" (Strang interview).

If the return home was not strange enough, the readjustment was sure to be hard. Spending a year or more in a war is bound to cause problems for the soldier when he first returns to civilian life. Ralph experienced a difficult adjustment, but it was mild compared to that of many soldiers who had severe Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Ralph had to remember that he was not in a war zone anymore. When eating, he would get done as quickly as possible because in Vietnam he had felt that it was unsafe to stay in the same place for too long. This carried over into

his leisure time also. He recalls, "I couldn't say I'm safe and I'm home and all that." Sleep was also an issue. Ralph felt unprotected because there was no one on guard duty to watch for the enemy. A year is about how long it took him to return to normal, but the memories are still strong for him (Strang interview).

The Vietnamese had a much different adjustment to go through. They had been involved for so long that some did not know what to do: "The end of fighting was like the deflation of an entire landscape, with fields, mountains, and rivers collapsing on themselves" (Bao, 98). They often wondered if after such bloodshed and chaos, "Would it still be possible, one day, for us to go back, to rediscover our roots, the beauty of creation, the rapture of a peaceful life?" (Duong, 193). They did not get to leave the war-torn environment. They had to return to villages that were ravaged by war and big cities that were poor and littered with the bits of America that we left behind. Hanoi was a prime example of the big city that was different for one soldier who did not recognize the Hanoi he had dreamed of while in battle. He just saw the sorrow and suffering and the "loneliness in poverty" (Bao, 138). As with Ralph, one Vietnamese soldier felt very close to his experiences:

> So many tragic memories, so much pain from long ago that I

> have told myself to forget, yet it is that easy to return to them. My memories of war are always close by, easily provoked at random moments . . . (Bao, 40).

The American soldiers had to deal with the idea that the war was lost from the American perspective, but the issues were much deeper for the Vietnamese. They knew they had triumphed over their invaders by forcing the Americans to leave, but the apparent results of the war were not very triumphant. One Vietnamese felt about the victory that

> As we had won . . . then that meant justice had won; that had been some consolation. Or had it? Think carefully . . . look carefully at that peace we have, painful, bitter and sad. And look at who won the war (Bao, 179).

This attitude of the Vietnamese people distracted them from their victory. One soldier had thought from the start that no matter what happened as a result of the war, "he knew that there would come a day when he would go back to the mud of the rice paddies, to life as it had always been, from time immemorial" (Duong, 279). One even commented that "there is no new life, no new era, nor is it hope for a beautiful future that now drives me on, but rather the opposite. The hope is contained in the beautiful pre-war past" (Bao, 42). The desperation that one soldier felt

when the conflicts were over was very disheartening:

> Those who survived continue to live. But that will has gone, that burning will which was once Vietnam's salvation. . . . Our history making efforts for the great generations have been to no avail. What's so different here and now from the vulgar and cruel life we all experienced during the war? (Bao, 43).

War can bring about many engaging repercussions within and around each participant. One thing that the soldiers all had in common was the reformation that war presses upon them. This alteration is brought about by, "the individual's journey from innocence into experience, the serial discovery of what had before been unimaginable, the reality of war" (Hynes, 17). This impact was shared by all soldiers, no matter how different their experiences were or how well they adjusted to this new strangeness. One idea that may seem strange to one who has not experienced war directly and gone through this change is that the soldiers "aren't even interested in victory or defeat, except as it affects them personally; survival is their happy ending" (Hynes, 11). For outsiders looking at the results of war, the issue is not seen from that view point. Critics are more focused on political or financial aspects. The critics lose the true reality that for all who survived the war there was some success.

The soldiers were successful because they did what they had to do and lived to tell about it. It is very true that the soldiers were cognizant that war did not bring about all of the ideals that were originally intended. They were aware that the political and financial aspects do play a part in the final outcome of the war. The soldier's dilemma comes about when he questions the reasons of the war and if the intent was worth the outcome. Samuel Hynes points out that "when it becomes clear that the answer isn't rational, or doesn't exist, the soldier's response is anger and bitterness" (12). This is what the soldiers shared on both sides of the Vietnam conflict. Neither saw results that had justified the energy and blood invested and the terror and devastation that had been suffered on both sides.

Something unexpected is how similar the people and their experiences on opposing sides can be. The experiences are obviously very similar for two sides fighting in the same war, but the number of similarities between the Vietnamese and the American soldiers is surprising. The overall dissatisfaction with the outcome of the war is a very significant similarity, but it seems futile when the defeated and the victorious both look back on the war and can find no outcome worth losing what was lost in the war. Ralph hopes that through the destruction and

horror of war felt by both sides

> that maybe our presence there even though we left, and they [South Vietnamese] were taken over by the communists, that they remember what it was like when we were there; and some of the things that we, that they learned from us they still hold on to and think of are valuable lessons in life, if you want to say that. That we affected them in a positive way even though we couldn't, our government couldn't figure out how to win the war, that there was some positive influence there. You have to hope and pray that there was something there that made all those people dying there worth while . . . (Strang Interview).

## Works Cited

Bao Ninh. The Sorrow of War. London: Secker and Warburg, 1994.

Duong Thu Huong. Novel Without a Name. Trans. Phan Huy Duong and Nina McPherson. New York: Penguin, 1995.

Hynes, Samuel. The Soldier's Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War. Allen Lane: The Penguin Press, 1997.

Ky Niem Thanh Dang. "A Young Man's Recollection." Poems From Captured Documents. Ed. and Trans. Thanh T. Nguyen and Bruce Weigl. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1994. 24-25.

Lanning, Michael Lee, and Dan Cragg. Inside the VC and NVA. New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1992.

Nguyen Lam Son "Can Tho, My Village." Poems From Captured Documents. Ed. and Trans. Thanh T. Nguyen and Bruce Weigl. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1994. 50-53.

Ong Giang. "My Thoughts." Poems From Captured Documents. Ed. and Trans. Thanh T. Nguyen and Bruce Weigl. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1994. 4-5.

Strang, Ralph. Personal interview. 9-10 Jan. 1997.

Vu Bao. "The Man Who Stained His Soul." The Other Side of Heaven. Ed. Wayne Karlin, Le Minh Khue, and Truong Vu. Willimantic: Curbstone Press, 1995. 166-171.

# Appendix

This is the transcript of an interview that I conducted with my Father, Ralph Strang, in order to begin this thesis. I taped it on January 9th and 10th of 1997. It to me is the most valuable part of this project. I am very grateful for the help that my father gave in my pursuit of this information. This paper was a valuable piece of my college career; but more importantly, it presented the opportunity to get to know my father better. I hope my interpretation of it gives his story the recognition that it deserves.

Some things that might not be quite clear or were not addressed in the transcripts will be presented here. Ralph was a part of Alpha Company, First Battalion, Seventh Marine Regiment, First Marine Division. He arrived in Vietnam on February 9th of 1968 and returned home 12 months, 24 days and 6 hours later. He was stationed on Hill 22, but throughout the tape he refers to other places where he served at during his tour. Please do not use this just as a reference; read it and see what one man felt he needed to do for his country and the impact that his experience in Vietnam had on him.

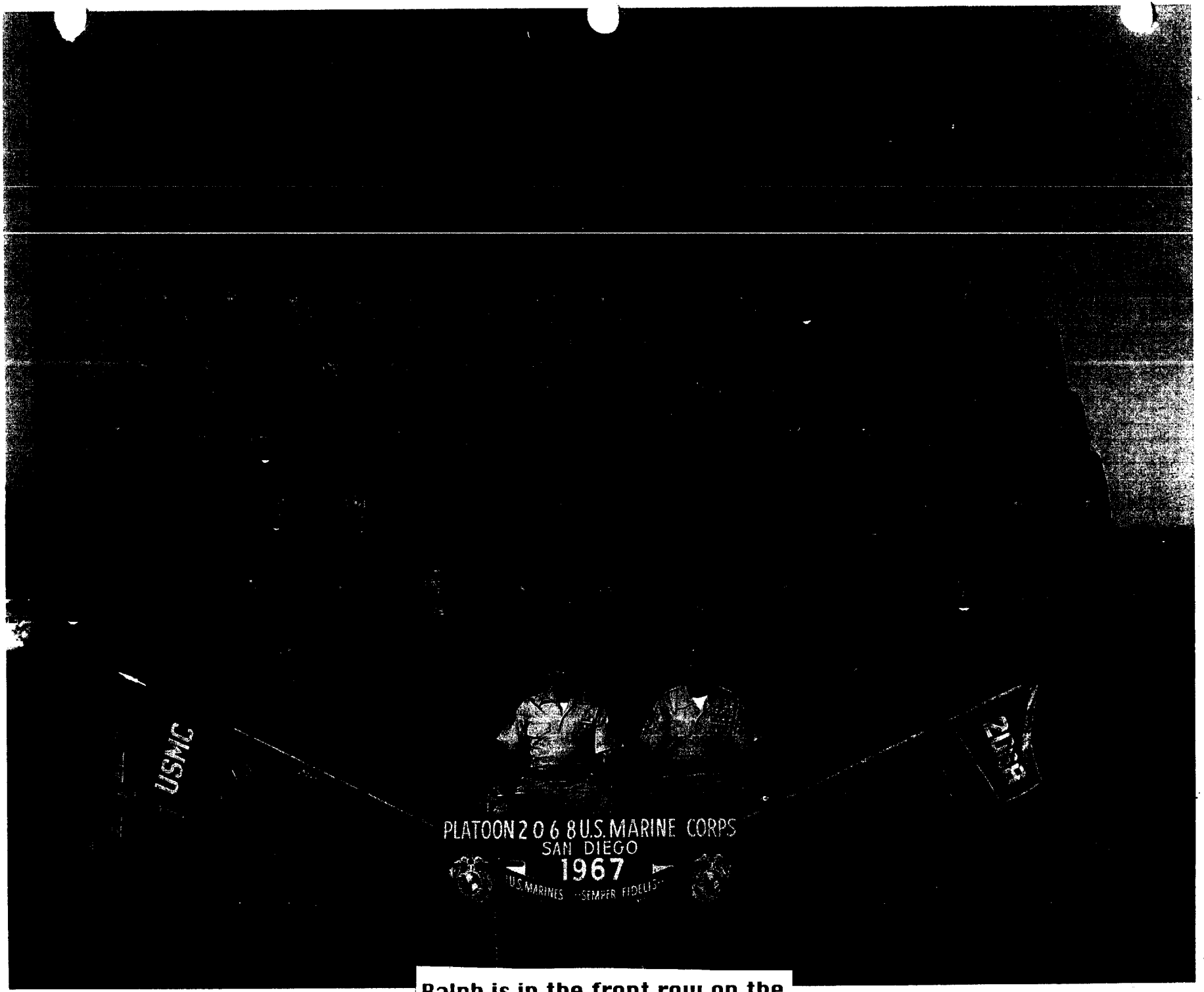
# GRADUATION

**Boot Camp Graduation, 1967**
**Ralph Strang**

**Shower on Hill 22**

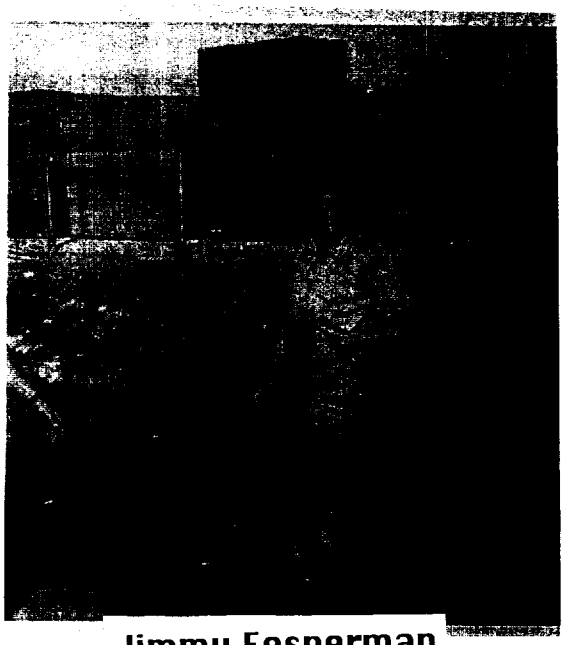
Pfc. R. F. Strang

Platoon Honorman
and Blues Award

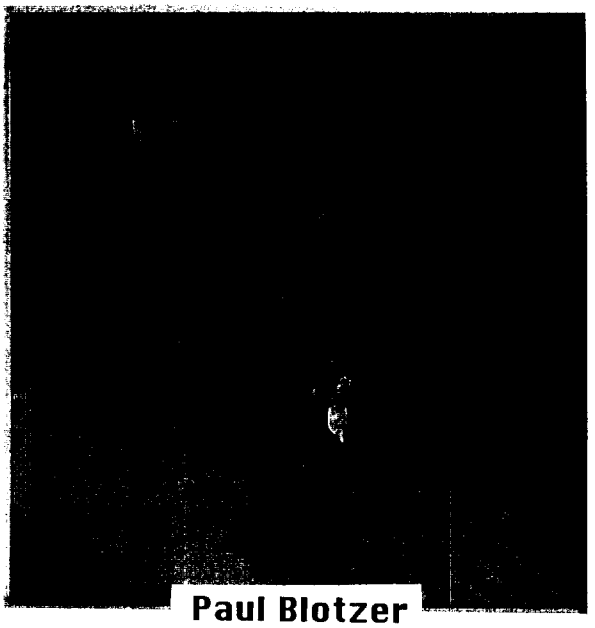



Ralph is in the front row on the left by the USMC flag

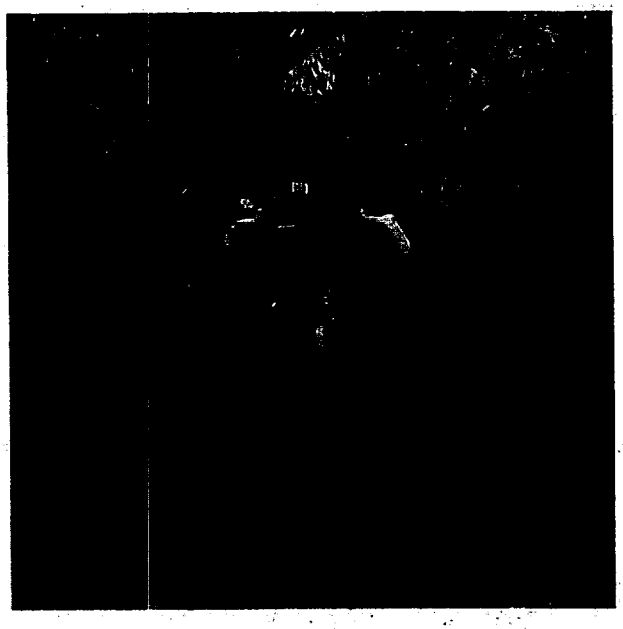

Quonset hut on Hill 22

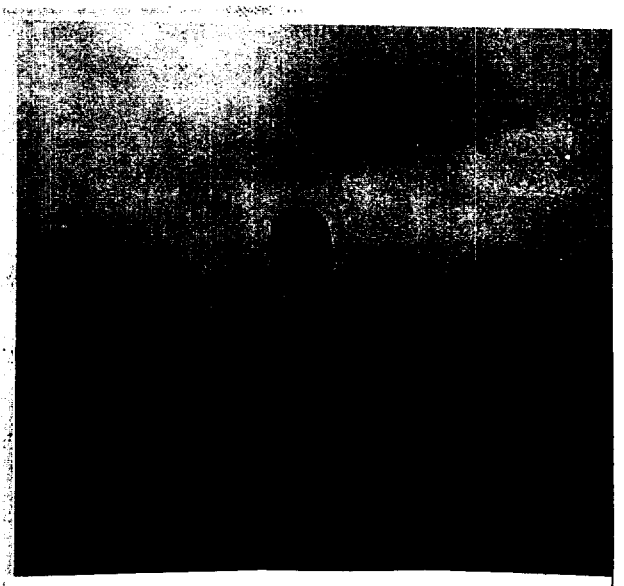


Jimmy Fesperman



Paul Blotzer





Ralph Strang getting ready to go out on patrol

Rochelle Strang
Thesis Tapes
Transcript
May 8, 1997

Ralph Strang's Experiences in and relating to Vietnam.

Okay, Vietnam: how I ended up there, why I wanted to go, why I wanted to get out, what happened when I was there, my training, and all that. I guess the best place to start is at the beginning. I was raised in a patriotic atmosphere, and I felt when I was growing up that the reason I had everything I, all the freedoms I had and all that was because of this country. My father was a Marine. He fought in W.W.II. He got shot. All of my uncles, my dad's friends, most of them were in the military, fought in W.W.II, and I just felt this tremendous obligation to the United States, if they needed, you know, if we were threatened her that I would go into the military, the Marine Corps. I always wanted to be a Marine, that's what my dad was. And so when I got old enough to know what was going on and the Vietnam War was on, I felt that's where I needed to go.

I went to a year of college [at Butler University] before I joined the Marine Corps. They wouldn't let me in the first time I went out [bad acne on his back], but in the summer of '67 I went back for another physical, and I got in. At the time they needed people in South Vietnam to replace all of the dead guys and the wounded guys, so I got in and went to boot camp in San Diego. Our training out there, it was, they taught you how to march. They taught you how to shoot. They taught you how to follow instructions. They taught you to respond without thinking because when you are in a combat situation that is what you have to do. You can't weigh the odds, or think about what somebody tells you to do because if you take the time to do all of that either you're dead or a lot of

people around you are dead, so you have to just learn how to react; and that's what they teach you in basic training. Boot camp was 9 weeks long. The first week was all medical, testing and stuff to make sure you were going to be able to make it through the last 8 weeks. Boot camp normally had been a 12 week period, but they needed so many people so quick that they had cut it down to 9 weeks. In fact, my platoon going through boot camp and our series which was four platoons, we were the last short boot camp that the Marine Corps had. After we had gone through then they went back to 12 weeks. It was mostly physical fitness. We ran everywhere we went. If we weren't sitting down or laying down, we were running, or marching, or both.

It was real strenuous, but the physical part wasn't near as bad as the mental part that they do to you when they are trying to break you down into nothing and then build you back up into somebody who will follow orders without question, which later on in the Vietnam War wasn't the easiest thing to do. When you had people leading you that you knew more than they did about what was going on and yet they were trying to tell you where to go, what to do, how to do it, and getting you killed in the process. Then after a while, after a certain amount of time you just didn't pay any attention to them. You did whatever you wanted to do when the need arose, and if they didn't like it they could court martial you, but I don't ever remember anybody actually being court martialed for doing what you were supposed to do out in the bush, instead of doing what some boot lieutenant tells you to do.

A big part of the training was shooting the rifle. About three weeks were, out of the 8 weeks we were in actual training, were dedicated to shooting. We went to Camp Pendleton [California] for three weeks. We actually lived in a brick building instead of a

tin Quonset hut like we were in San Diego, but we were up everyday before dark standing out in the mountains waiting for the sun to come up so we could get on the range and practice firing. Somebody wrote down sometime in the last couple hundred years that the deadliest weapon in the world is a Marine and his rifle. And the way they treat you when you are at the range, I believe that because that's, you know, because if you can't shoot then you're not any good to anybody. And everyone who goes into the Marine Corps goes through the same boot camp and the same rifle range training and the same combat training even if you are going to be a cook, or in the band, or a clerk, or a truck driver or whatever your occupation ends up being. You still go through boot camp. You still learn how to use a rifle.

As far as the actual training that we had, preparing us to go to war in Vietnam, it was pretty; they tried to make your training and your surroundings as much comparable to what you were going to be fighting in as they could , but the temperature in Vietnam was like 115 degrees, all day, almost every day even when it rained. At night it would get down to 75-80 degrees sometimes up in the mountains, and you would swear you were in Alaska because you would be freezing to death; but it's because you were all wet and the wind would blow and all that. And it was pretty hard for them to duplicate the conditions exactly. Just the weather and the surroundings, well terrain, yeah I guess that is as good a word as any, terrain. It was a tropical climate, but they set up villages. And they had people in the villages who set up booby traps, and you had to go through these villes in Southern California and try not to get blown away by a booby trap or hit or step in a pungi pit. Or they made all these exotic booby traps that you see in the movies, and I guess in fact there, in the beginning in Vietnam and in some of the more jungle terrain,

you know, people who were actually in a tropical rain forest situation for their tour, there were some pretty exotic booby traps. But I was up north-about 20 miles south of Da Nang, and we were in farm land, you know, rice paddies and treelines, most of the booby traps we saw were explosives. There was a hole and you stepped in it, or there was a trip wire and you hit that, or there was some guy sitting over in the tree line with a hand detonator, and when enough of you got in the same spot then he'd set off a booby trap.

Playing war over here and trying to, you know, get a mindset on what was going to happen to you when you got over there, there was no way to prepare you for what you actually found when you got there. They did their best and all of that, but it's still, when you got done with your training over here you went back to your barracks or you went back to your Quonset hut, tent or whatever, and you got clean, and you got to sleep at night for the most part. We had some overnight maneuvers just to get used to that type of thing. And we had an escape and evade training where they took you out, and you were captured at one spot in the base, and then they'd let you escape, and then you had, with a compass and a map and all that, try to find your way from your prison camp back to where you were gonna spend the rest of the night. And when we did that they said, "Now, whatever you do, don't . . ." You know there was out of bounds like on either side of the gaming field, but it was pitch black, and you couldn't see your hand in front of your face, and they said, "Now, don't go on either side of the fence." And so, the first thing we did was, "we're going over the fence, you know, there ain't gonna be nobody out there!" So that's what we did. We went hard right and went until we hit a fence and climbed it and went another 50 yards and then went all the way back to where we were spending the night. Never got bothered by anybody. I don't know if anyone else ever did that or not.

That particular night nobody did, but it was that kind of thing. You weren't really afraid other than if you were afraid of the dark, but there was no fear of somebody gonna kill you. I fact even if you stayed within the perimeter of this course, if you want to call it that, or this place where you were supposed to escape and evade from , somebody might jump out and scare you, but they weren't going to cut your throat. So we did that, and as far as in the states goes, that was really about it on the training to prepare you for war.

Now, when we went to, on the way to Vietnam we went to Okinawa, which is an island over by Japan. And they had some pretty good villes set up and some courses that you went through. I don't mean book courses, but I mean terrain courses and villages set up and different things to try to simulate what you were going to have to deal with over there. Booby traps that you had to find at night by crawling on your hands and knees and putting your hand out in front of you until you felt a wire, which is all kinds of stuff that you never actually did in Vietnam. And they really tried to prepare you for what you were going to get into, and I suppose the mental part of it, you know. When I got there I thought I was the baddest guy on the block, and everybody that I was with over there felt the same way. But the very first patrol I ran, there was like 12 of us. It was a night patrol, and a normal marine squad has like 20 people in it, you know, but I never once in the 13 months I was over there ran a patrol with that many people in it. And in fact, at one point in time we were so low on men that we ran a 3 man patrol. That was pretty scary, but this first patrol that I went on there was like 12 of us and it was dark, and real dark. It's not dark like in the states where, you know, the malls lit up over here, there's a little town over here that you can see on the horizon or anything. I mean there's like nothing. It's just black until the sun shines. And we were walking along this paddy dike;

and, of course, I fell off the paddy dike into the water and a couple of guys had to drag me out, you know, so I wouldn't drown even though it was only 2 foot deep. Then we walked on a little farther and somebody started shooting at us. And it was like this guy had a single shot rifle , you know, that we all grew up with when we were kids, and we were walking along and we've all got automatic weapons. We have hand grenades. We have law rockets. We have the ability to call in airstrikes from Phantoms. We have, I don't think we had naval airfire because we were too far inland, but we had artillery. We had any kind of support weapon you want. And this little guy sitting on the other side of the rice paddy with a squirrel rifle was trying to kill me. I thought, "Huh? If I'm bad, if I am the baddest guy on the block, how bad must this guy be because he is trying to kill me?" (Ha!) So kind of like from the very first day that I got there, I realized that maybe something they had taught me in training wasn't quite the way it was. Although you had to feel that way because I don't think if you felt like you weren't that kind of a person that you would have ever got off the plane. You would have just ran away and hid somewhere.

The first thing I noticed about Vietnam, well we flew over on a commercial jet. Since this is like a comparison between us and the enemy, you know, we left California on Continental Airlines. Flew to Alaska to pick up some officers or something, and we stopped in Hawaii, and then Japan and then Okinawa before we got to Vietnam, but anyway, so it was like going on vacation for the first couple of days until we got to Okinawa and did the training that I was talking about before. The Vietnamese, the people we were fighting, the enemy, which I, the enemy I'll get back to in a little bit; but you know they lived there. And the difference between fighting--going to somebody else's

back yard and fighting a war, and having to fight it in your own backyard is night and day because we knew we were going to be there for 13 months, and the enemy was never going to leave. In fact, some of the South Vietnamese that we met there, we ran operations with and stuff who lived 100 miles away and hell, they hadn't been home for 6 months or a year. And they didn't have any plans of going home. When you asked them when they were getting out they didn't understand what you were talking about because they never got out. And still aren't out for all I know, a lot of them. So it was a whole different thing, and I don't think the United States really understood that part of it for a long time until, up into after the Tet Offensive in '68. They, the enemy, really showed what they could do. They were well organized. They carried nothing, I mean, I told you we had automatic weapons, hand grenades, and radios and access to any kind of support weapon there was. These guys had a rifle. They had some pretty good rifles actually, AK-47's and AK-50's. They had some hand grenades that were, that got the job done, but they weren't anything high tech like ours. And they carried one canteen of water, and we carried 3 or 4, you know, I mean as much water and food as you could carry. That's what the American's concentrated on. The enemy had a bag of rice, water, a pair of shorts, maybe a pair of slippers, maybe not, and a rifle and all of the ammunition they could carry because that's what they were interested in: killing us, and getting us out of their country, and going back to whatever lifestyle they were used to which was living in a hut and raising their cows, and their rice, and their kids, and like that, so it was really a culture shock when you get there.

The first thing I noticed was the smell. When they opened the plane, to get back to the story about going over on a Continental jet, was the smell. It was wood smoke. It

was hot, wet, just diesel fuel from us being there with all our trucks, and they used the diesel fuel in the wire of the perimeters of the bases over there to burn off grass and stuff so there wouldn't be any foliage there. And it was just a very strange smell. It got to be where the wood smoke smell out in the villes at night when we were running patrols was a real comforting thing, you know. It reminded you of home if you had a fireplace, and if you didn't it still reminded you of home. But the smell was really really noticeably different from anything you had ever smelled before. We got off the plane and started walking to the area where we had to get our assignments where we were gonna go, and we were just walking down this airport thing, and we were outside. I saw my first Vietnamese, and it was a woman. And she was walking somewhere, carrying something, and all of a sudden she stopped and squatted down in the street and went to the bathroom! I mean there's a guy from Elkhart, Indiana, who now he's in South Vietnam, and he sees this woman stop and go to the bathroom right on the street. It was mildly upsetting , you know? I didn't have any idea. And I came to learn that that's just how it was over there.

We talked to a lot of kids over there, little kids. The Vietnamese had stores set up where we took our laundry sometimes if we were able. When we were running patrols we would come on these little shops like they'd set up in the different villes, and they would sell cold Coke and give you all the dope you wanted if you were so inclined. And they had other things, souvenir stuff: picture books, photo albums. You know, just little dime stores, I guess you could call them, but they were just under a straw roof with four poles holding it up. And you would talk to these kids and the first one I ever asked about Mickey Mouse, he had no idea who Mickey Mouse was. I said, "You never heard of Disneyland?" No. Didn't know what Disneyland was. "Did you ever hear of

California?" Nope. They didn't know anything. They had no idea of the culture that we came from. And after that, after being there a few months and discovering this, that's when I started thinking right away that we should've been educating these people instead of fighting their war for them. Because in the end everything we did, and everything we tried to do for them militarily, and set them up in 1973 after all of the United States troops were gone except for some advisors or trainers or whatever you want to call them, they just went right back to being like they were before we ever got there because they didn't know any better, ya know. They didn't know any different. I mean they saw us come in, and they saw all of our wealth and our stereos and our tape players our beer and our food and all the, you know, even though we were a military unit, we ate better than they did, our tents were nicer than their houses, when we got to be in them. And then all the buildings and everything we put up on the big bases at Da Nang and Ton Sonh Nhut, and all those places. It was like we moved the United States over there, and what we should have been doing was trying to bring their country to a level of civilization, I guess if you want to call it that, higher than they were because they appreciated what we had. But once we left there, they didn't care. It was great. There's been people invading their country for a thousand years, or something like that. None of us, I don't think, ever took the time to educate them, or to bring their standard of living ahead enough that they would be willing to pay the price to keep it like that. Not that you have to be an American or to have to know about Disneyland or Mickey Mouse to survive. They are still over there surviving. They are an agricultural country, and they made it through the war, and now we are starting to build big cities over there and golf courses and all kinds of stuff. But anyway . . .

The next thing that happened, we were assigned a little barracks area or tent area. Actually it was where we had to stay the first night or two until we were assigned to a regular unit, and this was January of 1968. I got there just before the Tet offensive, the one that changed everybody's attitude about the war, back here anyway. All of the political people and all the people in charge realized then, after the Tet offensive that's it, we weren't gonna win. I don't know why it took them so long to get us out, but the enemy just had this will to survive, you know? Ho Chi Mihn's doctrine, they believed in it. But we were assigned these tents. We got there and I asked the corporal, or sergeant, or whoever was in command, "Where's our weapons?" He says, "Oh, you don't get any weapons yet." I said, " What?!" You know I just went through all of this training, you know, to come over here and fight, and now I am in Vietnam and I don't have a weapon. That concerned me a little bit, but we didn't have to stand guard duty or anything like that. We could just sit around in the tent and wait until tomorrow and hope that we got assigned to a unit. But my first night in Vietnam I didn't have a rifle and it was, I couldn't believe it; but neither did anybody else who was around me, so I guess it was O.K. There was a whole bunch of nights after that that I wished I wouldn't have had one and was still in that tent in Da Nang, but for the first night that I was there I had no weapon. Didn't have a helmet. Didn't have a flack jacket. Didn't have anything anybody told me I needed to have when I got there.

I think it was the next afternoon or maybe it was 2 days later, I can't remember, they finally came around and assigned everybody to a unit. And we get into these half ton of three quarter ton trucks, and they took us out to our hills, and that was the first time, you know, my first ride through the countryside in South Vietnam in a truck, still

didn't have a weapon or helmet or anything else. And I am riding out now through the, where it all happens, and no way to protect myself. So it only took about an hour, I guess, to get to hill 22. It was a real small hill, company sized hill which was, a fully staffed company of Marines is 4 platoons, you know, it has got to be close to 200 men maybe 250. We might have had 150 or 175 people, and that was with weapons platoon there which we had mortars on base. We didn't have any big artillery. Our hill, you could throw a rock almost from one side of it to the other. There was four platoons there and we each had, each platoon had three tents, I think. Then the weapons platoon had a tent. We had, we were up a little bit. We had the high ground, you know, which is always a good idea when you are in a war, Is to be up above anyone else. Which didn't always happen over there, but this hill happened to be a pretty good place, and so I got my first rifle, an M-16. We had trained all through boot camp with M-14's which is a big weapon, which at the rifle range we fired those and qualified with them. I was really looking forward to getting one back. Well, I get over there and they give you this thing made by Mattel. In fact, Mattel probably made them better than whoever made these because they were notorious for not working when they were needed to work. We were told of we kept them clean, they would always fire, and that was a crock. But it was also pretty hard to keep them clean because of all of the humidity and dust and, you know, just everything like that. I mean you couldn't carry your rifle around in a plastic bag because you might need to shoot it, so we did have some problems in that way.

The first pair of jungle boots I got, which are canvas topped military boots, they look just like the state side ones only they, the black shiny ones that you see everybody wear but these had green canvas on them. They sent me down to the supply hooch to get

all this stuff. The guy says, "Well, go out there's a pile of boots out back," from everybody whose been killed or wounded, and "Just pick out whatever size you need." Well they didn't have my size exactly, and I got to the bottom of the pile and finally found a pair. They had holes about the size of a silver dollar in each inside where my heel was at. And I wore those for about 7 month, I think before I ever got a new pair. But the Marine corps is notorious for always giving money back to the government. They get a budget like the air force and the army, and everybody else spends more money than they are allotted, and the Marine Corps always gave money back. I don't know if that is why there is still a Marine Corps or what, but the weapons, we finally got weapons, and we started working. We ran three patrols a day. We got, I can't remember if it was every other night or every third night, we got to stay on the hill, but we were on guard duty. I think it was like one night every two weeks we actually got a night off, except you were in a reactionary squad then which meant you got the night off unless some other patrol got hit; and then you had to go help them. So it wasn't really a night off unless you lucked out and nobody else, nobody got in any trouble. The patrols were, our area of responsibility was South of Da Nang, and we were to keep the enemy from being able to attack the airbase with rockets, or mortars, or artillery or any of that stuff. So we spent the days and the night looking for the Vietnamese gun crews, squads, whatever might be coming in to get to Da Nang with rockets or mortars or whatever.

Most of the time over there it was real hot. It was real nasty, but it was real boring too. I mean, other than just being, I mean, you were always afraid. You know, you were always worried about stepping on something or having somebody shoot you, but it got to the point you would get so tired you would just be putting one foot in front of

the other and waiting and hoping the patrol ended so you could sit down and smoke a cigarette. It was real hard work. I mean, they kept you out there. They kept you out in the bush so you couldn't think about what you were doing or why you were over there. When we were back on the hill during the day and between patrols and filling sandbags and all that kind of stuff, usually the company gunny had you picking up cigarette butts or pieces of paper, you know, keeping the hill clean. And like I said, I know now they did that to keep you from thinking about where you were and what you were doing. And it worked. I mean we were always mad either at the enemy or at our company gunny. You still got homesick and you still wished you weren't there, but their psychology worked for the most part. They kept you going.

The first firefight I was ever in the hill got hit one night, I mean I had actually gone to my Lieutenant and I said, "Hey, I joined the Marine Corps to come over here and fight, and the gunny's got me picking up cigarette butts during the day." And I said, "You know, I mean what can I do to get out of picking up cigarette butts?" And he said, "Aw, just, soon enough, soon enough." And just a couple days after that we were on the hill getting ready to go out on a night patrol, and we got mortared. There is no speed like getting into a trench when somebody's dropping mortar rounds on you. Then one of the squads that was down off of the hill a ways got in an firefight with somebody, I don't know who with or how many or anything like that. So there were incoming rounds from that, coming over the hill. And we got down in the trench, and it was real exciting. I happened to run into the Lieutenant. He was checking the lines and I said, "Man, you got any cigarette butts that need picked up?" Because it doesn't take much of that combat

stuff, and you realize that it is not a healthy situation. So that was the first actual firefight that I was in.

The first patrol I was ever on [April 8] that anything bad happened to, we were, we went out on the river patrol. It was a deal where the navy had some big flat bottom boats they ran up and down the rivers over there. It was faster to get to some places by river than if you had to go over land to check out different places where the enemy was supposed to be. There was like, I think we had 12-13 guys that day, not counting the navy guys who were running the boat. Two of us were, two boat loads were on one side of the river, and the boat with the corpsman in it was on the other side. We started out, and it was a nice ride. We had a breeze because the boat was moving. It wasn't all that bad. One of the guys in the company before I got there, a few months before I got there, had been killed on the river. He got shot. But, yeah, the river patrol was this cool thing that everybody wanted to do and I, of course, wanted to do it. I had volunteered a couple times previous, and they said, "No, you haven't been here long enough to be able to go out there." Because it was more dangerous, if that's possible, than what we did everyday anyway. So we were cruising along; and they always said that on the river patrol when you stopped somewhere to check out a village or a house or a cave or whatever it might be, that's where all the bad stuff is gonna happen anyway. So when we stopped and got out of the boat, we were walking very gingerly, looking around. We were in elephant grass over our heads. You couldn't see anything anyway, but we were trying to check out this little village like thing with half dozen hooches maybe. So I was stepping pretty light, and I had just picked up my right foot, looked around to see where I was going to put my right foot to take another step, and as soon as I did that I heard a horrendous

explosion. I looked up in the air, and there was this big cloud of black smoke. You know, and I figured, "Oh yeah, I'm dead." But then I realized that if I would have been dead, I wouldn't have been able to look up and see this big cloud of black smoke and all that. So I realized it was somebody else, or I figured it was. The point man came running out of the treeline ahead of us and said--hollering for the corpsman. I said, "Who was hit?" And he said, "The whole first fire team." Well, I knew he was a little excited because he was a part of the first fire team, and there was nothing wrong with him. Before I even knew it, before he even got over the river to holler at the other boat, the corpsman and the other guys were across. They obviously knew what was going on. What had happened, there had been a detonated, a hand detonated mine, on this trail and when the radioman, the Lieutenant, and two other guys got pretty close to it, they touched it off. The Lieutenant was killed right away. His radioman died about an hour later because the doc had set him up pretty good with IV's and all this other stuff. He woke up and started fighting the corpsman and pulling out all the stuff that he had done to him, and he died. A friend of mine got hit in the head, but just a little bit. The guy that was, I guess he was standing on it, I mean it looked like he was standing on it when we finally found him, was dead too. And then you really started thinking seriously about what the hell you were doing over there when your first friends start dying.

We set up a 360 around the bodies where the corpsman was working and stuff. This was before [Billy Jo] Vickers [the radioman] woke up. Sergeant Jackson started yelling, "Incoming grenades!" And I thought, "Holy cow!" And sure enough we looked up in the air, and there came hand grenades out of the jungle at us. The grenades never hit anyone or hurt anyone but it was, I mean, that's how close the enemy was. Of course

we threw hand grenades back and opened up on the treeline, but never saw anything. The enemy backed off, and we were able to get the, organize to get the bodies out, and get out of there. We, me and another guy, got the Lieutenant. We, well actually, they carried Vickers out in a poncho. Then somebody said, "Get Frank." Well, I didn't, I had no idea where Frank [Masepatao] was. Well Frank was laying over in the rice paddy. It looked like when we found him that somebody had just pulled him in 2 pieces. I picked up one of his legs. Jonesy picked up another on of his legs. Then we went and got the rest of his body and put it in this poncho, and hauled him out. When we got down to the water and somebody said, "Well, you've got to get the Lieutenant." The squad leader's name was David Jones. He'd been blown away 3 times already; and he thought he was John Wayne, so that's why he kept coming back. He says, "I'll go! I'll go!" He says, "Strang, let's go." I was stupid. I didn't know any better, so I went with him. We went back up across the paddy and over to this little ville. It was just us two and the Lieutenant's body was still there. And I remember in training they said whenever you go up to a wounded or a dead soldier, American, the enemy will booby trap their body. And I thought about that, and I yelled at Jones and he says, "Oh Yeah." Like that, so you kind of pulled them back towards you to see if anything happens. Well, we'd only been gone a few minutes, but if they were close enough to throw hand grenades on us they were close enough to do something to the Lieutenant. Well they didn't, so we drug him for a ways, and then Jones picked him up and threw him on his back. Jones is a pretty good size fella, but he didn't go 10 yards probably, and he couldn't do it anymore. So I threw him on my back, and I might have went 10 yards. So we just put him down and drug him the rest of the way across the paddy. It was really wild because he made noises, you know, and I said to

Jones, I said, "Man, he might still be alive." He said, "Nah, that's just air coming out of his lungs." So we got back to the boats. We got all the bodies in the boats, and we pulled back down river 100 yards. Then they made us get out of the boats again and go up in the rice paddy, and then they called in the Phantoms, jets. They had at it in that treeline with napalm and explosives, regular bombs that blow up. We swept back through the ville and found 3 bodies. Whether we shot them or whether the fixed wings blew them up, or burned them up, or who knows; but that was the first real firefight I was in, and after that when I realized that not only could people die that you just heard stories about, you know, how great they were and all that, but people could who you actually knew and cared about. Then it started to become a whole different deal. Then it was just surviving. Save your friends, you save yourself, and it didn't matter about anything else--the United States, Mom, apple pie, the girl you left behind--all that stuff was just for movies and books and all that. And the rest of it was just living from one second to the next and hoping that the seconds added up to minutes and hours and days and months so you could go home.

Then after the river we just went back and did a lot of, we ran a lot of operations in the summer. We had booby traps. We had guys hit booby traps and stuff, but we never really got back into it real bad until operation Allen Brook which was in May, end of May and on into June. Like I say for the most part the day to day stuff, running patrols, running night ambushes, doing all of that kind of stuff, it was scary, and it was boring, and it was tedious and all that. But, you know, after a while you just get used to it. You get numb, or whatever you want to call it. Just being scared never went away, at least for me. Because I think if you ever got over being scared then you'd start doing

stupid stuff, and get yourself killed or get somebody else killed. As long as you were afraid, and maybe that's not the right word, as long as you never lost that respect for what the other guy could do to you who was trying to kill you then you were O.K. Then it wasn't so bad. The enemy, I said before I would get back to that, in a war, when we were in training and stuff they didn't talk about Mr. and Mrs. Smith that lived over in South Vietnam, you know, and about their kid who was going through the same training you were and all that. They just talked about the enemy. They were the enemy: the red menace, they were gooks, they were zipper heads, they were dinks, they were anything, but they weren't people. It was a lot easier to go over there and kill something that was just a thing like a rock or a tree or a book or whatever, than it would be to go over there and do that to somebody who had a Mom and Dad, or a wife, or a girlfriend, or kids, or anything like that. I'm sure the enemy was trained to think that way about us. When we found, or when the first times we ever were around dead Vietnamese, and we found wallets. You know they carried wallets like we did, wow. They had, the North Vietnamese that we fought, the regular army people that had better weapons than we did, better uniforms, cooler packs than we had, and knew what they were doing over there, not the farmer by day, soldier by night, V.C. we called them, Vietcong, but the regular NVA, North Vietnamese Army, they had, you know, we found stuff on them. Letters, of course we couldn't read them, but they had letters and pictures and clean socks and all kinds of stuff just like we had. I mean it was really, that was another awakening , I guess if you want to call it that, to when you found out these weren't just machines or things, but they were actually people, and that made it a lot different, too.

As far as tactics go, in most wars the object of war is to gain something. I don't know if anyone's ever really gained anything in a war, gained enough to make the price worth it anyway, no war I ever heard of at least. Starting way, way back when the Romans and those people were fighting, all the way up through the Civil War and the Spanish-American War and all that. If one person dies you have to have a pretty good reason for that, you know, especially if that one person happens to be you. In Vietnam there were tens of thousands of people who died. Millions of people who died if you count the enemy. O.K. so as I was saying, it turned out that the enemy was just like us. They had training. They had uniforms. They had boots. And so they were like, like people now instead of something, something bad. you didn't hate them any less, but you couldn't because if you started liking them then you had a major problem on your hands.

As I said before, after you have a couple of these experiences out in the field in actual combat, then it is just a matter of you getting out alive. Surviving every day and your friends--taking care of your friends, and them taking care of you. I met and got to be good friends with about half a dozen people over there, really close to them. One guy I still see a couple times a year. One guy I used to see quite a bit , but how he was over there and how he was after he got home was 2 different things, so I don't see him much any more. And in fact Blotzer is the only guy I really see or talk to or anything anymore. Once in a while when I first got home, the first couple years, I'd remember somebody's name or something and the town they were from, and I would call them, and talk to them on the phone a little bit, but really you don't, after you get out of the war, you know, after you're not so dependent on everybody. The war put you together with people that maybe you wouldn't even talk to if you walked by them on the street, you know? But because

you were all Marines and because you were all in a war and because you were all in the same outfit and all that, you got to be close, very close, because your life depended on them and their life depended on you. I tried never to make anybody mad over there because if you were out walking down a paddy dike and this guy who you had just pissed off in the morning saw a trip wire, or a hole, or a sniper, or something like that and he stopped and thought for one second, "Well, why should I help him? He did this or said that." Well you're dead. That's all the longer it takes. So I tried to be friends with everyone. People who I didn't particularly care for I just didn't associate with any more than I had to except if we were out in the bush or whatever.

We played poker over there when we could. Gambling was a big deal because we all had money and no place to spend it except for sending it home to save for when you got out or to pay, in my case, I sent some home to pay for the last semester of school; but mostly we had a lot of money and nothing else to do with it, so we played cards. We rolled the dice. I won 300 dollars from a guy, well this Blotzer. It was either three or four hundred bucks cutting the cards one time. He was in weapons platoon. He was a machine gunner. He didn't go out every time that we went out on patrol because he was a squad leader too. I'd run a patrol on an exceptionally hot day, uncomfortable. We didn't find anything, no booby traps or anything; so it was a successful patrol in that way, but we got back to the hill, and I was thirsty as all get out. Blotzer came out to make sure we were all alive and all that. And I said, "Yep." And I said, in fact, "I'll give you 100 bucks for a glass of ice water." And he went into his hooch and got a kool aid pitcher full of water with a big chunk of ice in it. So I paid him 100 bucks for that. I would have paid him more, but I owed a couple of hundred dollars to another guy who had loaned me

some money. But it was that kind of a thing, you know, there was no reason to put on airs with anyone over there. There was no reason to be anything but what you were because everybody knew that when it got right down to it and the shit hit the fan they knew who you were, what you could do, what you would do, who they could count on; and that was all that really mattered over there, so it was a pretty real existence unlike in the United States peace time or just regular day to day living. You might try to impress this person or that person, or I don't know if putting on airs is the right word, but that is all I can think of right now, over there that kind of stuff just didn't matter, so . . .

The other, or another, guy that I got to like a lot was named Jimmy Fesperman. He was from Charlotte, N.C. As far as I know he still lives there. He was in another company, Bravo company, so I didn't get to see him near as often. It was really funny the way we met. We were on hill 55 when we first got to Vietnam waiting to be assigned to our line company. I met him in a tent. We were just sitting around, him and I and several other guys, and in his hat, in the top of his cover was the word "angel" was written on there. He reminded me of a guy who had dated my sister, who had already been to Vietnam and came back . His nick name was "angel." His name was Ansel Patrick, and he's from Osceola and I see him once in a blue moon. I run into him, but anyway, Fesperman had this hat, and it said "angel" on the inside. They had a really, the resemblance that, how they looked was really something too. So I asked him, "Where are you from?" and this kind of stuff, and he told me. I told him, I said, "Man you look just like this guy who used to date my sister." So we kind of struck up a friendship that way. Then he went to another company, but one of the hills that we ran patrols off of and stuff was hill 10 and Bravo and Alpha company were both on that hill at the same time. So

even though we didn't get to run the bush together, when we were on the hill in between patrols, night off whatever, we got to spend time together. And I got to know some of his friends from there, but it was really cool because we went on R and R together, Fesperman and I did. While we were on R and R, my parents went down to Georgia to see my oldest sister, and on their way down there they stopped at Fesperman's mom and dad's house in Charlotte and spent a day or , spent two days, I think there. We were on R and R, so we called Fesperman's house and I talked to my Mom and Dad, and he talked to his Mom and Dad, so all that was pretty cool. So we got to be pretty good friends.

One day we were on hill 10, and I was in the outhouse as a matter of fact, I think it was a Sunday morning, and reading a Look magazine. All of a sudden the whole hill blew up. I mean it was like as far as you could see in every direction was this massive explosion. I thought to myself if the gooks got something that can do this we're in deep shit. So I got out of there, got down in the trench along the hill, you know. Didn't even take the time to get my rifle or anything. I just wanted to get underground or as far underground as I could. The Lieutenant was walking by telling everybody to be cool, it was an accident. I thought, "Oh, good! One of those deals." And what had happened was the Phantoms over there, the fighter planes and the bombers were remote controlled. Their payload, their bombs and stuff were released mechanically. If they were to bomb an area where a man's reaction couldn't quite get it done, they could program this plane to release the bombs and stuff automatically, computerized or whatever you want to call it. Some plane was flying around up there somewhere and all its bombs came out or some of its bombs came out and just happened to land on hill 10. The reason that I'm saying this is because Fesperman, one of the biggest explosion things was, came from, Bravo

company area. So after we got down there and found out what had happened, I ran over there right away to see how he was doing. He was being helped out of his tent which had taken a direct hit from, what this bomb was is they call it a COFRAM bomb. It has other names, but what it means is this big bomb comes down and blows up above ground and sends out all these little bombs, and then they blow up all over and that's why the scene of everything blowing up as far as you could see, that's what caused that. He'd got hit pretty bad in the legs, and it killed somebody in his tent. I don't remember who. Fesperman was pretty screwed up. He went to Japan for, I think he was gone a couple months before he came back to Bravo company, and I saw him again on hill 10. He was O.K., well enough to come back and run the bush again. He was a machine gunner also, and I saw him after the war too, of course. I saw him several times down in Charlotte. I would go to Georgia, and then I'd call him and he'd say, "Well, come on over to Charlotte, you are already this close." You know, so I would get on the bus or a time I think I had, a couple times I think I had a car that I could take. After I got my own car, I went over and saw him, but he was just . . . So anyway, Jimmy was another guy that I really got close to down there.

There was a guy named Chet Cosgrove. He is dead now. He got killed over there. The reason I got to know Cozzie so well is because when I got to Alpha company and started running patrols they made me walk next to the last man in the squad. Cosgrove was "tail-end Charlie," that's what we called the last guy. My responsibility was to never leave Cosgrove out in the bush because whenever we stopped for whatever reason when we were on patrol either day or night, either one really, his job and what ultimately ended up to be my job was to face the back and watch for anything that might

come up on the squad from behind, any kind of ambush or attack or whatever. And if the guy, the second guy in, didn't yell or tap you on the shoulder or somehow signal you that the patrol was moving out, you'd turn around and everybody would be gone and you were there all by yourself. I never did it to Cosgrove, and I'm glad because he probably would have shot me. Once we traded places and I started walking "tail-end Charlie," he was my second guy. He never left me out there either. And we ran some patrols that was so dark that you had to hold on to the guy in front of you because you couldn't see anything. You could not see anything. You get into the jungle and even if there is a moon and stars you'd get in places that you actually had to hold onto the guys belt in front of you or his pack or whatever, so you didn't get split up.

One night out on Operation Allen Brook we had walked for I don't know how many days it seemed like without stopping, and we were all real, real tired. We had an objective we were trying to get to for the next morning to have a frontal assault, or an on line assault just like in the movies. We stopped and everybody would fall asleep and then you'd have to get everybody up, and I'm just talking about a minute or two, I'm not talking about 15-20 minutes. One particular time we stopped, I dozed off, and I woke up just in time to see the guy in front of me disappearing into the elephant grass. I jumped up and started after him, so I didn't lose sight of him. I realized that I didn't have a helmet, that I'd left my helmet where we stopped, and so I turned around to ask the guy behind me if he had it. There wasn't anybody there. So I passed the word up the column that the column was split and it takes, you know, 100 Marines a long time to stop in the middle of the night for no reason at all. So the next thing you know, here comes the captain back, wants to know what's going on, you know, and so I said, "Well the

column's split. I looked behind me and the guy who was supposed to be there isn't there. I don't know what happened, but he's gone." The captain says, "Well I want you to go back there and find him." I said, "Well I don't think that's a real good idea." If they come towards us we know that they are coming, you know, following us, but if I go stumbling around through this stupid elephant grass back to them their going to think that I am a gook and blow me away. So we argued a little bit and just before he was going to threaten me with a court martial, or whatever he was going to threaten me with, some other marine came out of the bushes, and the column got put back together, so it turned out to be no big deal of an incident at all. That didn't have anything to do with "tail end Charlie." It was just splitting a column out in the middle of nowhere in South Vietnam in the dark of night was pretty exciting.

Cozzie was this, he was a crazy guy from New Jersey, Chet Cosgrove. Like I say we got close walking "tail end Charlie". He was really strange because in the daytime he would walk as far away from the rest of the squad as he could, 100 yards. Which wasn't a real good practice because first somebody could have jumped him, and it would have taken a while for us to get to help him; or second same way if we'd have gotten hit up front (which is I'm sure why he was way back there) was he wouldn't have to be right in the middle of it, but it would take him a while to get up to help us if we needed it, too. He made this really crazy noise. He called it a seal call, and I am not even going to attempt to do anything like that, but it was so funny to hear him do it. Him and this buddy of his, Dave Marko. I think was his, I think it, I know it was Marko, but I can't remember if it was Dave or not. They went in the Marine Corps on the buddy system and all that kind of stuff. They both could do it. I mean it really was a cool noise. It was

always good for a good laugh to get them to do it. He used to leave hill 22 at night and just go for a walk. He wouldn't even take his rifle. He had this big knife that he carried around for some reason because he wasn't Daniel Boone or anything, but he thought this knife was really cool. He'd walk into Da Nang. He'd walk down to a main road, get into a jeep or a truck or something, somebody going by and hitch-hike and go into Da Nang. I don't know how many times he did that. He never got caught, I mean if somebody came around asking for him we'd say, "Oh he's in the latrine." or he's down here or down there, went out on patrol or make up some kind of story. So he never got caught, but he was a maniac.

In fact over there they had this deal you could get into called Combined Action Platoon, CAP units. What these were is they'd, a squad of marines would go out in a village and live with the Vietnamese. They had a little perimeter there with wire, a hooch, and all this kind of stuff. They also had South Vietnamese Army people with them, maybe a platoon, 30 or 40 South Vietnamese and then they'd train them, teach them how to shoot better, teach them tactics, how to run patrols, how to shoot some of the weapons. Just kind of, it was a military thing, but it was also then they were there for medical care for the, they always had a corpsman with them, a navy guy to take care of the kids or anybody who was sick in the village or anything like that. And it really sounded like really gravy duty, compared to what we were used to, all the patrols, operations, and all that. So a bunch of us got a wild hair and signed up for it to go into this CAP. Well Cozzie was the first one who got in. And before any of the rest of us could ever, ever got accepted he went out somewhere. He wasn't far from where we were, just a few miles, but his hill got overrun one night, and everybody got killed, all the

Marines that were there and most all of the South Vietnamese that were there. Nobody knows why in a deal like that, what happened. We don't know if they were all partying and not watching the lines or, you know, You don't know. When everybody's dead you just know that everybody's dead, and that's all you know. But I'd like to think that that's the way it was, you know. That he went out having a good time because he was such a good time for everybody else. I mean he was a really nice, fun guy to be around. But after that those of us who still had to do our interviews for CAP, I know myself when I went to Da Nang I talked to this captain he was asking me all kinds of stupid questions like, "What do you think of the Vietnamese people?" Well, I think that they're all trying to kill me. History has shown that most of them were. If they weren't actually shooting at me they were making bullets for the people who were or making clothes or food or hospitals.

The Vietnamese, the enemy, if you want to say that, had a network of communication and supply and everything. For not being mechanized, you know, they had some trucks and things like that, but I mean when they got down to South Vietnam when they come out of the mountains and got down into the actual South Vietnamese territory, it was all manual stuff: Bicycles and by hand, carts, I mean it was amazing and of course we didn't know about any of this or a lot of this while we were there. This all just came out after the war was over, but their tunnel complexes where they had hundreds and hundreds of people in a tunnel complex. They had rooms that they stayed in in these tunnels. They had hospitals underground. They had, they made munitions down there, clothes. They had food, I mean, it was like cities, complete cities underground, and we could never find them. They'd come out and fight, and they'd just disappear. Again, we

found some tunnels while we were fighting. You couldn't help it. A guy's walking along and all of a sudden he's gone, and he had to go somewhere. But these massive complexes, you know, weren't discovered until well after the United States had pulled out most of their troops and things like that. Until then we didn't realize the magnitude, the effort that went into these underground towns, or cities. You could set under there and have a B-52 drop a bomb right on your head and it wouldn't bother you. I mean it would make a lot of noise, but physically it didn't hurt you at all. The enemy was really, they really believed in what they were doing. But that's what happened to Cosgrove. He wanted to be a CAP unit guy and he went. Fortunately for the rest of us when he didn't make it, none of the rest of us ever ended up going to a CAP unit. His friend Marko came the closest, but he got wounded again or something. I can't remember what happened to him, and he got to go home. The CAP unit had lost all of its glamour after Cozzie got killed there.

This Jones guy, this John Wayne that I was telling you about on the river patrol, we were running a night patrol one time, and I was carrying the gun this particular night. This was, I think, after Blotzer went home. He'd gotten me into gun squad. You had a little bit of extra time off when you were in the weapons platoon. You didn't have to run every patrol like the grunts did because you could take turns, if you had enough people. I was carrying the gun this particular night, and it was a black night and we were running out through these paddies and you'd like leap frog. Part of you would go across the paddy dike into the treeline, and then the rest of you'd come across. While they were going ahead of you, you covered them and when you were coming behind them, they covered you and all that. We got to one of these exceptionally long paddy dike deals,

and Jones took the first half of the squad over, and several minutes went by; and we were just waiting because you had to wait and then you listened to see what's going on and if nothing happens then you went ahead and went across. Well before we could get ready to get up Jones yells back across the paddy, "O.K., Bring over the gun!" And I just, I almost blew him away right there because his yelling at the top of his lungs in the middle of the night in South Vietnam that the machine gun is over there and the other, the rest of the squad is over there. Fortunately, nothing happened. There must not have been any enemy around listening to him, although I don't how they, somebody couldn't have heard him or shouldn't have heard him, but when I got over there I said, "You ever do that to me again . . . " And he never did after that. But there was a lot of nice people over there, nice guys. There was a few guys that thought they had to bad asses, and they wanted to fight and they wanted to do this and that, pick on people. But we had all we could do to handle the enemy and our job without fighting amongst ourselves. So there wasn't a whole lot of that and usually those guys got themselves killed or wounded or beat up, and they got out of the unit. They were only around for a short time

Operation Allen Brook was the biggest operation the Marine Corps had ever run in Vietnam, and like I say it is May or June, I think. We went out for 16 days and walked around in this really bad stuff. We had a few booby traps. No firefights to speak of, I think we got shot at by our own people a couple times. In fact, when we left Liberty Bridge we were riding on tanks, and somebody opened up on us from the river with small arms fire, and we had to jump off the tanks and dig fox holes and all that kind of stuff. In fact Blotzer, this guy from Pittsburgh, when he tried to get off the tank, the strap or one of the straps on his pack got caught in this grading on the tank, and he was just hanging

there, flopping around like a scarecrow wanting to get down real bad, since we were being shot at. Finally I think it just broke, the strap broke that he was hanging there by, and he got down O.K. He didn't get hit or anything, but that was pretty funny. But anyway, we ran this operation and we were out there for like I say, a couple of weeks anyway. Nothing really bad happened, and we came back in to Liberty Bridge; and we were crossing the river, and there was this Colonel standing up on this bunker watching us come by. We were pretty nasty, we brushed our teeth every day. We always had this stateside thing about having to brush our teeth. If you couldn't do anything else you brushed your teeth. We didn't do anything else, but brush our teeth in those 2 weeks. So we got back to the tents, and they got bologna sandwiches, hot bologna sandwiches, not cooked but because they were out in the sun in this truck. Warm pop, it was a real treat. And we are sitting there choking down these sandwiches and smoking cigarettes like mad because we finally got resupplied with those. Squad leader comes in. Well, actually it was a platoon sergeant and said that we were going back out because this stupid colonel said that we looked like we were in the best condition of anyone who came back, and some of the replacements hadn't gotten there yet, so they were going to send us out for, I think it was 48 hours. I'm not sure, but I think it was 48 hours. So they said, "We'll give you food for 3 days," or whatever it was and we ate all that before we ever left the hill. Filled up our canteens, and all that, and we headed out and in the end, total I think we were out for 4 or 5 more days. We lost half our company one day in about 20 minutes. We had walked all night pretty much. Our platoon, and when we got our company, and when the sun came up we were right on the edge of the river in like this thing that looked like a football stadium. It was like a river or creek that had dried up and ran, you know

down in, so it was all sandy. It was like a stadium, and on both sides it was a jungle and elephant grass and all that. Well they put third platoon up on left flank, that's where I was, and first platoon was up on the right flank up in the jungle, and then they left first platoon, second platoon? Second platoon down in this sand and then we had to do an on line assault towards the treeline and the rice paddies away from the river, and we had gotten pretty much bogged down in the jungle trying to get through there and all of a sudden we heard all this small arms fire and machine guns and hand grenades and all that other stuff. Then we lost communication on the radio. We couldn't get any, find out what was going on. Well, what had happened was second platoon had walked into a North Vietnamese bunker complex with hard core, same/same us people [NVA, not V.C.]. All but one of them was killed. There was 40 some guys that died. I mean they were doing hand to hand combat and all that stuff just like in the movies. Of course we had no idea what was going on. 20 minutes was all it took, and it was over. And what had happened to the radio was the radio guy who was the only guy to live. He was all shot full of holes, but he came back after that and ran the bush some more. But he had keyed the handset on his radio and didn't know it. He was out. He was shot up and didn't know it. So we couldn't talk to anybody. Didn't know what the hell was going on. And then we spent the next two days trying to get the bodies out. There was some, 2 or 3 helicopters got shot down, medivac choppers. We didn't have any food. We didn't have any water. We didn't have a lot of bullets left. It was just really nasty. It was the nastiest thing that ever happened to me in Vietnam, Operation Allen Brook. That day when we lost half our company in about 20 minutes. We got out of there and we got back to

Liberty Bridge, and we sure didn't look like the most fit guys to get out and do anything again, ever.

They let us go, and we went back to hill 22, in fact. And we just got a new C.O. in 2 days after we got back. This guy comes in. His name's Captain , appropriately named. His physical attributes were just like his name. He stood us out there, those of us who were left. We're having this bad time about all these dead friends that were still out there, and told us about how he was going to make us the best outfit in the Marine Corps and how he'd done this and done that and he says, "In fact, I made all the operations in Camp Pendleton." We thought, "Oh yeah there's all kinds of gooks over in California trying to kill you." So he didn't start off, he didn't have the best of, he was in the wrong place at the wrong time actually, so he didn't have that much success there at Alpha Company with us. Those of us who were left. He turned out, he wasn't, he didn't have any idea what was going on. We'd go out, we went out on operation after that, and we went back to, we were out of water. The choppers hadn't been able to get us water, and we went back to the command post and there he was standing there with a helmet full of water, shaving his face! I hadn't had any water since the day before, so he didn't exactly know what was going on even though he had made all the operations there were in California and just really knew all about it. He was really the only bad officer I knew over there. Most of the officers that I got to know at all were really good people, good marines. They listened to you. They knew that us, the guys that ran the bush all the time knew more about it than they did and until they were able to learn they didn't force their will on you. We had one guy that took us out one night and he wanted a spotter round out of a mortar to mark our position. So he called in this H.E. round, you know, which is

high explosives. The squad leader, a guy named Wayne Rollins from Shelby, North Carolina, said, "We're not going to do that sir because you don't know where we are, and I do." And as it turned out, him and Rollins had at it for a little bit verbally. And Rollins says, "Well I'll prove it to you." And called for a round of illumination instead of explosives. The illumination round went off right over our heads. And if this guy would have called in this H.E. round, we would have all been blown away, or a lot of us would have. So then that guy turned into a pretty good guy after that too. Once he realized that he did not know everything about running patrols in South Vietnam. For the most part, most of the guys that I ran with over there even though I didn't get to know them real well like Cozzie and Fesperman and Blotzer, they were real decent people.

Most all of them believed the same way I did when we got there and almost all of them believed the same way I did when we left: That it was unfortunate that the whole deal had to go down. The most scared I was over there was, I can't remember if it was a part of Allen Brook or what. We were up in the mountains doing something and our company was walking point and our platoon was point platoon and our squad in fact was point squad. And so when night came and we set in we were right on the edge of we didn't know what, you know because we, nobody had ever been down the trail another 20 yards, so we dug in and it was time to send out listening posts. Listening posts you take out, you go out with two or three guys and a radio, and you set out in the jungle, and you wait for the enemy to walk by, and then you call on the radio and tell everyone back on the line that the enemy just walked by and they've got to be prepared. The only problem you've got with the listening post is that they give you three options. If whatever you hear out there you think you can handle yourself then you can take on the enemy and

fight them yourself. Or if you think there is more there than you can handle then you let them go past you and let the people on the lines take of it, but the only problem with that is you are out there too. Right where the enemy is and the people on the lines can't tell you from them because it's dark and so that's probably a pretty good way to get killed, so that's never really an option. The option of taking on the enemy force out there in the middle of the night with all your own guys behind you a couple of hundred yards wasn't a real good idea either because if any rounds went in over their heads they'd start shooting. So the other, the third option, the only option that ever really was, was getting the hell out of there and going back to the main lines when you heard something. So I had these 2 guys with me. One of them had the radio, and I was in charge and we went out probably 100 yards from the lines. On the way out one of the guys kicked this can on the trail, you know, I don't know what kind of can. I don't know, but he kicked this can. So we got out, set in and they immediately went to sleep. Both of them. I mean, an the one guy snored. I mean it was awful. I couldn't keep them awake. Everyone had a right to be tired, but not on an L.P. So I tried to keep them awake, you know, and then you had to key your handset. They'd call you on the radio and say if everything's O.K. key your handset once or twice or whatever. And that's how you communicated to let everybody know what was going on, so of course you sit there and I don't care where you are you are going to hear something, whether it is the wind, monkeys or whatever it is. So we did and we decided, we went back to the line. Well, on the way back in one of those guys kicked the can again. So I thought Ahh, you know. So we get back in the lines and the lieutenant comes down and we told him what happened. He says, "Well O.K. wait and hour or so and get back out." Oh yeah that's great. So we waited an hour, maybe an hour

and a half; and we headed back out and somebody kicked that can again. The can becomes a very integral part of this story. That's why I keep mentioning it. And we sat down again, and they went back to sleep again, and did the radio thing again, and, of course, we heard something again, so we headed back to the lines and somebody kicked that can. I never kicked the can but this was four times now that this can got kicked by one of the other two people. So were sitting there, and I happened to be pretty good friends with this guy manning the machine guns in that last position on the side of that mountain. His name was Rick Cowalker, and he was another story, but he liked to shoot the gun. In fact, he had killed a gook right there where we were at when we first got in there and set in. I don't know what the guy was doing there. He had to be real stupid, but so he was on edge anyway. Cowalker was always on edge, but we got sitting there and the captain came down again and he was all mad because we came back in a second time. Well, we didn't really care if he was mad or not so he says, "Well, you sit there for another hour and then you go back out." Well, I had already made up my mind that I wasn't gonna go back out there again unless the captain went with me. And so we're sitting there talking to Cowalker and somebody kicked that can. And we were still in the lines, but that can, somebody or something or I don't know what, but that can went clank, clank, clank. And that was all it took for Cowalker. He opened up with that M-60, and I don't know how many hundreds of rounds he shot, you know. Here comes the captain just screaming and raising hell, "How come you're using automatic weapons?" And all this and that. Well, that's because he was up in his own little hooch area and he wasn't out sitting on the lines waiting for the enemy to overrun. But by the time that argument and all that stuff got done they just decided to forget the idea of the L.P. And that was all

right with me. That was the one and only L.P. I had ever been out on and, but it was, looking back on it it was pretty funny because nobody got killed and nobody got hurt. But it was really something when that can got kicked around and all of us were still sitting on the lines.

Cowalker was a guy, He was from Connecticut and he had this weird, weird family deal where like he, anytime he wanted to go into Da Nang he could go. He had this big envelope full of papers from like lawyers and stuff because he was, I don't know if his mom and dad were divorced or maybe one of his parents was killed. I can't remember all of the details anymore, but he would go in and start telling this long sad story about his family and how he's trying to find his mom or his sister or his dad or somebody like that and they'd let him go in. They'd let him go into Da Nang and he'd go in and party and then he'd come back. But he always said that his sister was his mother or his dad was his brother you know. It was just really, really funny to hear his talk about his family tree. I doubt that any of it was true, and where he got all of these official looking documents talking about him being adopted and all that kind of stuff, I have no idea. But he had a pretty good way to go on vacation whenever he wanted to. He didn't abuse the privilege, he just waited until it got real bad and all of us had to stay out there and he knew he didn't have to.

I ran into this one Canadian guy who was over there. We were sitting around somewhere in the bush. It just so happened this guy said, "Well, yeah I'm from Canada." "Oh yeah? What are you doing here?" "Well I volunteered, I joined the Marine Corps." He says, "I could go home anytime I wanted to." And he got plenty of raspberries over that. "Well, what the hell are you doing here then?" He was still gung-ho enough or

inexperienced enough or whatever you want to call it, patriotic enough, that he was there, and he didn't have to be. He could have got up right then and walked back and said, "I'm done." And go back to Canada and everything would have been just fine. But there was a lot of strange stories over there. On all the different hills I was on over there the Phantoms, the Marine Corps pilots that flew the jets, I think they were F-4 Phantoms, had this thing they did. They would buzz the hill. Make this real loud pop. I don't know if they were breaking the sound barrier or what they were doing, but they made a hell of a noise. And if you didn't see them coming you wouldn't know that they were there until they did, as soon as they went past you, of course, and heard this big boom, sonic boom, I guess. And everybody would fall on the ground or jump into a foxhole or into a trench or into a bunker or something to get away. They did it all the time. It was fun after the first 2 or 3 times when you realized what was going on. And then it was an especially good time when you saw one coming and the people around you didn't and you knew what was going on. And then you'd just sit there and not say anything or do anything and those babies would go by overhead and that big boom would go off and everyone but you would be crawling around on the ground trying to save their lives.

When the monsoons came over there and it rained forever, it seemed like you were wet all the time, the movies that you see where the people wear ponchos, forget that, you can't move around in a poncho. You can't. You're out in the bush, you have to be able to use your rifle. You have to be able to able to use your hands to climb around and do whatever it is you do. And you couldn't do any of that with a poncho. The only thing a poncho was good for was if you were sitting somewhere. Usually it was better to sit on it to keep the water on the ground from getting all over you, than it was to have it over

your head, but you could make a semi lean-to out of one if you had, in fact it was best if you had two because the water stayed out better. The very first patrol I went on where I fell in the paddy dike, and the guy tried to shoot us that I talked about before....(end of tape).

Some really strange stuff happens to you when you're in a war zone. You're tired all the time. They work you real hard, like I said before, to keep you from thinking about where you are and what you're doing. We'd been out on operation for ten days, I think. Something like that and they brought us back to a regimental size hill, hill 55. It was real nice. They had a couple of clubs there. They had a movie you could go to. It wasn't the clubs and the movies you are used to in the states, but it was something to do anyway. So, of course, when we got back they put us on hole watch and we had to stand perimeter guard instead of go to the clubs or the movies. I don't know what time it was at night, maybe 10, or 11, or 12 O'clock. It really doesn't matter. And I was on hole watch with this other guy and we had a bunker we could be in but it was never a good idea to be in a bunker when you were standing perimeter duty because if the enemy got through the wire a lot of times the first things they blew up were the bunkers because they figured that's where the men were. Consequently, we stayed outside and away from the bunkers as much as possible, unless we got mortared then of course the bunker was a great place to be. Anyway, I was walking along and it was real dark again. I was very tired, had had not a lot of sleep in the last couple weeks and the next thing I knew I was on my knees on the ground. I thought, "Wow, did I faint or what?" because I had no idea what had happened, I mean, one minute I was walking along looking and the next minute I was on my knees on the ground. And so I just got up and didn't really think much about it and a

little while went by and next thing I knew, WHAM! I fell on the ground. Just fell down and I realized what had happened to me was that I had fallen asleep while I was walking! And I couldn't believe it, so I called the corporal of the guard. He came down and asked what the problem was and all that. I told him, I said, "Man I just fell asleep walking this post." I said, "I didn't think anybody was ever that tired, but," I said, "I must be." And he said to me, "Well we are all in pretty rough shape, you know, and I don't have anybody to send down." because they were all at the movies and at the clubs and all that. And I said, "Well, O.K. I will give it another shot." And I don't know a half and hour, 45 minutes later went by and I was doing the same thing, WHAM right flat on my face. I called the corporal of the guard back and I said, "Well, this is the deal, you either get somebody else down here or I'm going to sleep right here on the spot." And when I told him that, of course, there was a whole hill of marines that were available to come down and he sent somebody down, not only for me but to some of the other guys in my outfit that were in pretty much the same predicament that I was in.

One night when we were on operation. It was on night we were out on operation Allen Brook. We dug in for the night, and we were just sitting around waiting for it to get dark where we had to quit smoking and stuff. They said, word came down that we were gonna get hit that night, so we thought, "Oh, no, but O.K., so we were gonna get hit." So we dug a fox hole, and then word came down probably about a hour and a half later that there was going to be a whole regiment of North Vietnamese regulars coming right through where we were at. And so we rethought the digging the hole process and 3 of us in almost no time at all dug a fox hole that was deep enough we could all three stand in and to see out of it you had to stand on your tip toes. And we dug it with, we

didn't have a shovel of course, because that was too much to carry, so we used our helmets and our hands and dug this hole. And we were sitting around there pretty pleased, and then the word came down, "fix bayonets" which they had never told us to do before because as long as you have bullets, you don't ever fight anybody with a knife or a club or a rock or anything. So we did, and we were sitting there and then about a half and hour later they came down and said everybody had to move 3 positions towards the river. I mean this was awful news because we had this beautiful foxhole and we knew that whatever we got wasn't gonna be anything like what we had done. Because we were probably more scared than the guys three holes down. So we got all of our stuff and crawled down the line 3 foxholes and sure enough we were in the sand. The people that we had inherited the thing from must have been really brave because it was only about 1 foot deep. We tried digging it to make it deeper, but by this time you know, it was the middle of the night. We were even more tired than we were when we started, so that was no good. Fortunately, we were, we thought at the time, right next to a tank. So we thought this isn't, we don't have much of a fox hole, but we have a tank here to protect us. So sure enough we got hit, small arms fire. They started mortaring us. Never got the ground attack fortunately, but about half hour into the fire fight this horrendous explosion, I mean right on top of us, and I thought, "Uh Oh this is it." I opened one eye to see if I had any parts left, and I looked up above me and there was the barrel of this stupid tank. They had turned around to fire into the jungle and the muzzle of their tank was right over top of our fox hole. It was very loud, but we were very happy to know it was then and then after that we said, "Shoot again, Shoot again!" The more they shot, the better we liked it. And that fox hole that we dug, well, three guys inherited that foxhole.

One guy was named Richard Nuber. He was from Michigan. He was an artillery spotter with us and called in artillery for us. And two other guys that I didn't know. That hole took a direct hit from a mortar and they were all killed. And so even though we had this little cheesy hole and we were right next to this big noisy tank. We came out with the best of it because if we hadn't got that order to move down we'd have all been in there. Me and Blotzer and Lockear. So some good did come out of it, I guess.

The other, the second most nasty thing that ever happened to me over there in combat, other than the river patrol, and that day on Allen Brook when we lost half our company: We had walked pretty much all night, and we had set in in this really beautiful trench area, you know, trees around and brush and stuff. A really great place to hide. And had just set in there and daylight came. And the word came down that we had to sweep across this rice paddy in front of us. It was probably a couple hundred yards across to the next treeline, so usually the way they operate over there was in a treeline if you were out of operation they would prep it, either with airstrikes, or artillery or something. They wouldn't just send you into a treeline cold, like that especially first thing in the morning. So but nothing like that happened. The word came down and they told us to head out, so we got on line and we started to cross this paddy. We got about half was across and they said, "Come back! Come Back!" So we figured the officers had finally woke up and decided that they had forgotten one of the basic tactics of war, so we went back to this really nice trench and sat there for a while, but nothing happened. No artillery, no fixed wing, no anything, so the word came out to go again. So we got up and got on line. Started sweeping across this rice paddy. We got about two thirds of the way across and they told us to go back again. We turned around and went back. It was

getting a little annoying by now, but we knew whoever was running this show didn't know what the hell he was doing. So we got back in this trench and sat around for about another hour. No prep in the treeline, no artillery or anything and the word came down to go on across. So we got out and we got almost to the other treeline, probably three fourths of the way across, across that rice paddy and they hit us with small arms fire, mortars, rockets-- It got real loud, real crazy real fast. There was people dying everywhere. I mean, you know, in the movies you see groups of people standing around and a bomb goes off or an explosion happens and people fly up in the air and you think, "Wow, that's really cool special effects stuff, how do they do that?" But I mean we saw that, I mean almost as far as you could see there were marines on line assaulting this treeline, and they just had our number I mean they really, really had this place well mapped out with their weapons. So we took off and headed back to the trench area that we were in in the morning and when we got back there it was gone. It was like there was not any vegetation left. The trench had been, the ground around there had been leveled to where there was almost no trench left at all. And the only thing that we could figure out was that they had zeroed in on that with their weapons primarily and were hoping to hit us while we were still there figuring that, you know. Why didn't, I don't know if they were asleep or they didn't get there on time or what, but we were real fortunate not to be in that real nice hiding place when it hit the fan because we'd have all been dead then. The way it was I don't know how many people were killed and wounded that day, but that night when, after we got people out and all that and we realized that it was Mother's day, Mother's Day 1968. And all those guys were dead and their Mom was going to find out in a day or two days later that their sons were all killed on Mother's day, and it was really

something to think of all those moms who were going to get that really nice visit from the Marine Corps.

One of the things that was really that really helped everyone over there was all the letters that we got from home, from our parents, family, girlfriends if we had one, wives and all that. Mail call was looked forward to more than anything else over there, eating, drinking, sleeping, anything, was getting mail from anyone. It really, really helped you get through bad times and boring times and everything else. We had a lot of guys, including myself who got letters from their, either their girlfriends or their fiancees or their wives that would say, "While you are over there in Vietnam, I want you to date because I am going to." Well, there might have been somebody somewhere in Vietnam who could go out on a date, but when you live out in a rice paddy or on a little hill that might as well be a rice paddy there's just no water on it. The chances to go out dancing and all that are pretty limited. It was really funny, sad actually to think that people who were close to you like that, girlfriends, or a wife even, would be so stupid as to what war was about or what that war was about or any war as far as that goes. I don't know of any war where they went out on dates after work at night. You got to go on leave you got to go on R and R, you got to go into Da Nang once in a while, but even then you went in and you ate hamburgers and ice cream and went to the movie theater. Girls were available if you were so inclined, but it wasn't a date by any stretch of the imagination. It was really tragic when somebody got one of those letters from home saying that they wanted you to go out because you just couldn't believe that they were so ignorant of the situation that they would suggest that. When it was time to leave Vietnam, I was very happy of course, but at the same time you had this feeling of incompleteness because the

people who left before me who were there in 65 and 66 and 67, when they had a chance. When they went home they still probably thought that there, that we were gonna win, you know. The United States would prevail or the allies would prevail, but by the time I left, by March of 1969, it was over a year after the Tet offensive in 68. Everybody knew that we were just, it was just a matter of time before we would leave Vietnam, everyone, all the United States personnel and all that because we weren't gonna win. We couldn't win. The only way we could've won that war was turned it into a regular war and started fighting and taking over land. When we were in Vietnam, you went out and you ran a patrol everyday that might be a mile or 2 or 3, maybe 5 miles and then you went back to your hill and the next day or maybe even that night another squad of marines went out and ran the same patrol that you ran. It was over and over and over. It was like a paper route. You did the same thing everyday. There were lots of different patrols and stuff, different areas, but basically we never gained any ground. We had our hill and the enemy had everything else. We went out and tried to find them and chase them away and all that, but we never had any intention of staying out there and then the next day you go another mile or 2 to the DMZ [demilitarized zone] and then the next day, you know. And you neutralized all this ground and we never did that. Never the whole time the war was on, from 65 when the first marines landed there until we left. That was never part of the deal. I mean we were just there to fight the enemy, and there was a lot more enemy than there was of us, and there was an unlimited supply of them. No matter how many of them we killed there was always ten times more waiting to come down and take their place.

So the idea of winning the war by the time I was ready to leave there was gone. And it was just a matter of hoping that the people that you left there, your friends that still had time to do, would live and be able to get out and go home. We got on the plane in Da Nang in the middle of the night. I don't remember what time it was. And I thought, "Boy oh boy, this is gonna be great," you know. We flew Flying Tiger Airlines back to the states. And it was a big commercial jet just like the Continental that I flew in on. We got on the plane and it was just real quiet you know, nobody was really saying anything because nobody believed it was really happening I guess. But instead of a wild party, a dance band, and beer and all that stuff, I mean there was nothing. We started taxiing down the runway and the stewardess came on the phone, the radio thing there in the plane and said, "We're going home." And that was it and I guess there wasn't enough beer or enough bands or enough anything else that they could have had there that meant more to us than what that stewardess said that night when we took off. Once we got off the ground and we didn't get shot down, you hear all the stories about all the civilian aircraft that the gooks blew out of the sky over there, which was all a crock. You heard most of these when you were on your way over. They'd say, "Yeah, the last plane load they shot them right out of the sky in Da Nang and killed all the Marines and all the stewardesses, the pilot and everything." To my knowledge that never happened, but we were up and we were gone and it was wonderful.

We flew nonstop from Da Nang to San Francisco for a week. They tried to, well, you know, they updated all of your medical records and physicals and all that to make sure you were O.K. and didn't have any outrageous, exotic diseases or anything like that. And mustered you out: got all your pay to you and all that and of course gave you the

whole reenlistment speech, "Boy wouldn't it be great to stay in and you get 30 days off right away, you know, anywhere in the world, and then you get to pick your duty station." Yeah, your own duty station would be right back to Vietnam because that's what happened to everybody I met in Vietnam who had left and reupped for 6 months. They were all right back at it. When it came my turn, we went in this office to talk to this gunnery sergeant. He was pretty nice and told me what my options were. I said, "Well gunny I tell you what," I said, "I'd like to be a Marine and if you tell me I never have to go back to a war zone I'll just sign up for 28 more years right now." He said, "Well I can't do that." And I said, "Well, I know you can't gunny." And that was the end of that. I walked out and I think two days later we were standing in this big room getting ready to be free and there was, I don't know 100 of us probably. We were all in our dress green uniforms and all that and we were standing around smoking cigarettes and waiting for them to dismiss us and all that and I happened to be standing next to this guy who had his uniform on, but he had not shaved. Had his, we call them "piss cutters", they were military caps, not the ones with the bills, but the caps that just fit down and they were pointed at both ends. He had that on sideways. He hadn't shaved, and his blouse was open, and his belt was undone, and all that. He just looked really trashy, and I said to this guy, I said, "Man you better get your shit together because they won't let you out, you know, looking like that." And you know he had all this big line of B.S. about how they couldn't do anything to him because he was about to be a civilian. And I said, "Well, whatever you think." So about this time this gunnery sergeant walked into this big room we were in. He walked right down the center of this room and didn't really look left or right that I saw, and he walked right out the other end and shut the door. Right away this

guy next to me says, "Yeah, I told you they can't do nothing to me. They ain't gonna do anything to me." And I said, "Well whatever, whatever." And about that time that door opened that gunnery sergeant walked right back to the center of the room, did a right face and walked right up to this guy, poked him in the chest with his finger and said, "You're going to jail." And he might still be in jail for all I know, but I thought that was pretty cool. That this guy thought he was so bad he didn't have to wear the uniform correctly and look good even though we were gonna be civilians in ten minutes. Which we were. About ten minutes after they took him away they gave us our papers and we were gone.

Since I landed on a military installation and not a civilian airport, I didn't see any of those protest people and nobody spit on me or threw garbage on me or called me anything bad or anything like that, when I got there. And then when I left San Francisco and I flew home, I landed in South Bend [March 5, 1969] and that's about as middle of the Midwest as you can be and, of course when I landed I might have been the only military person on the plane. I was the only one in uniform as I recall. My mom came to get me and my Aunt Lillian, my Mom's sister. My dad had had a heart attack just a few weeks before I came home, so he wasn't in the condition to come to the airport, but that was it. No bands, no parades, no speeches, no anything like that. I was alive. I was sitting on the only souvenir or medal or anything else that made any difference to me, but all the parts, they worked pretty good. And I was home and it was pretty decent.

Well, It took me a long time to get used to being a civilian. When you ate in Vietnam, when you got a chance to eat you, even in a mess hall you sat down and you ate real fast because you didn't want to be in the same spot long enough to get blown away by a mortar or something like that. There was always that feeling of you have to move.

You have to be somewhere safe. You have to be near a trench, or a bunker, or something just to stand around leisurely in a war zone, even in the hill wasn't a relatively safe place. It was just an unconscious thing, probably from the training and living out in the bush. Your just always so careful about what you did. When I got home I had this thing, I'd be sitting in a chair or watching TV or something and it was like you see on TV when somebody dies you know their ghost passes out of their body if its a cat, the nine ghosts go out or something like that. Well, that's this feeling I had, you know, that even if I was sitting in a chair talking to somebody or watching TV, whatever, that I needed to move, I couldn't relax. I couldn't say I'm safe and I'm home and all that. That lasted a long time, a year maybe more. My Dad told me it took me about a year to be normal again. I had a real problem sleeping at night because there wasn't anybody on guard duty, you know. A lot of the times in Vietnam you didn't sleep at night anyway. If you slept, you slept in the daytime because you were safer in the daytime than in the night. Especially if you were out in the bush. You kind of know where you are where, what ambush sight you were at or what parts of your territory you were in. How much sleep you got. But I got home, and it took a long time to be able to sleep really good at night too. I saw and still see Blotzer from Pittsburgh. I saw Jimmy Fesperman from Charlotte, N.C. for a while and I called some people the first few years I was home, and talked to them, but it wasn't the same as being with them, you know, running the bush with them in the Nam. Everybody does different things. The truth be known, probably most of the people you got close to in Vietnam were, if you lived next door to them or in the same town as them, you probably never would have talked to them or anything like that if you didn't work with them. Just like when you got a job as a civilian.

They have, they put up the Vietnam Wall in Washington. I've never been there, yet. They have a traveling wall they call it, a real small replica of the wall. It was, it has everybody's names on it, but there's one that goes all over the country, and I went to see that over in South Bend a few summers ago, and I still go to the Marine Corps Birthday party every November 10 or so. As close to November 10th as they can make it. And I try to keep close that way to my experiences. They have these things they call L.Z.'s, landing zones. That's what they used to call the places where the choppers landed in the Nam. A bunch of people get together. I know they have them in Indianapolis; I don't know that they ever had one close around here, South Bend or anything. But I would like to go to one of them sometime. It's just like a memorial thing for everybody who did make it back from the war. They get together to remember and tell stories and all that. Since I've been back being, having been in a war, it makes your outlook, your life in general a lot different than people who never experienced that. And like I said, when I got home I was alive and all my parts worked and I was pretty lucky and because I know how, just why I wasn't killed or wounded or blown up or whatever. I have no idea. I don't know how any of us lived. I don't care if you were a grunt and ran the bush 3 times a day or if you were somebody who worked on a supply hooch or an officer person or a radioman in a bunker. I don't know why any of us lived.

We had as many, I saw a lot of people who were hurt by our own weapons over there too. I told the story about the bomb that they dropped on hill 10. We had our own artillery which was dropped on us accidentally. The gunnies had the guns set up wrong for the wrong coordinates that were called in. We were out on a sweep one day and an order came out for everybody had to change their socks. I mean, it's just like when there's

nothing going on like I said they have to mess with your mind to keep you from thinking about where you are and what you are doing. So we all set up on this hill, a nice little hill. We could see An Hoa. In fact when we were down there pretty flat land all around this big base and we could see the hill. Well, everybody stopped and those of us who had socks changed them. A lot of guys wore their jungle boots and didn't wear socks. I could never handle that. I could go without underwear. That was easy, but I couldn't go without socks inside my boots. And we were sitting there and somebody saw 3 gooks on the other side of the hill from where we were, which made them directly, we were right on the line between the hill and this little village. A couple houses and a couple hooches. So the artillery guy thought that he would call in a few rounds of artillery on this village. It was abandoned except for these enemy soldiers that somebody spotted. And so he shot, he called in a white phosphorus round. "Willy Peters" they called them. And it was right on target so he called for three more rounds of H.E., high explosives and the first 2 went over O.K. and landed in the ville. The third one landed right on the hill right in the middle of us. And man you want to talk about some scrambling. We didn't have holes to hide in. There were a couple impressions, or depressions in the ground, I guess that about a dozen of us crawled into, but we lost 3 or 4 guys that day, 2 killed and a couple of them got pretty messed up. Somebody said that the artillery round hit this one guy and spun him around before it actually hit the ground so I don't, know. I didn't see that. I was a little bit farther away from where the round landed. You live through something like that or you live with something like that for 13 months and then you came back here and things that bother most people or upset most people or a lot of people or upset most people or a lot of people, you know, you just they just don't have the same value to you. I

mean you still get mad and you still, maybe your not content with your job or your car breaks down, or you have to buy a new water heater, you know, just the everyday routine, things, you know that happen to you in life and some people even get all up tight about it even, but us, the people who were there, you know, you could just set back and say who cares, you know. I can walk across my kitchen and get a glass of water, right out of the faucet and it's cold, you know. I can go to the freezer and get ice cubes. I can go into the bathroom and take a hot shower, you know, and that's really all that matters. All the rest of the stuff is just decoration. When your living over there in the jungle all those luxuries that you have when you're here, you just don't have, so consequently you appreciate them a lot more perhaps than people who have never experienced being without them. We ran out of food one time and over there in Vietnam and we ate grass. We just pulled a handful of grass out of the ground like we were cows and ate that because we had got so hungry. We found some duck eggs and some ducks in a village over there one time. Some of the guys ate the ducks without cooking them. They ate raw duck. We bartered and got the eggs and we were able to make scrambled eggs in a tin can from one of our C-rats. So we got to eat the duck eggs. They were, but all those things that everyone takes for granted over here you know, you just, until you really don't have them and you live without them and you live in this uncivilized situation as long as we did, it really makes you appreciate what you have when you get here. It makes you, when you see people go bananas over something that really doesn't matter, you know, over something trivial as opposed to dying or having your arms or your legs blown off or having your friends die around you. It just, it is really something.

I went back to College to Butler University where I went to school when I came home, and almost everyone that I had been in school with the year before I went into the Marine Corps was still there. I went to see them, and they were all Juniors I guess and they just seemed different, you know, they just seemed not immature, but less mature, I guess than I remembered them being from before. And I spent a few days down there, and then I realized that it wasn't them that had changed. They weren't any different than they were when I knew them. They were a couple of years older, but that was it. But it was me. It was me that had a different outlook on everything almost than I had when I was in school and it doesn't make me any better or us any better than the people who had never had the experience in the war. It just made it different and when I started seeing friends from high school that I played football with and spent a lot of time with, it was the same way with them. I had some friends that went into the military into the Army, some of them went into the Marine Corps, that were more like me than the rest of them. But for the most part they were just, they didn't have the same attitude and outlook and feelings about life that I did. You choose, you don't choose to avoid them or not associate with them. You just choose to be with other people who might have shared the same experiences that you had.

As I said before when I got home my Dad had just had a heart attack a few weeks before and, but we were always real close. We hunted together. We fished together. Did spend a lot of time together. I was real fortunate to have a Dad like that. A lot of my friends that I grew up with didn't, Their dad's were either older or their dad's had other interests other than entertaining their children. But as I said before my Dad was in the Marine Corps in W.W. II. He was shot. He knew what combat was like. He knew what

being away from home was like. In fact he was gone for like four years, I think from the time that he went overseas or almost four years before he finally got to come back home because they didn't have jets and fast transportation and all that, good medical facilities, and everything. When I got home and it was in the summertime and he was recuperating, we'd go for walks, and talk about Vietnam and he'd talk about W.W. II and it was, you know a war is a war is a war. They were similar. The terrain was different. We were in South East. He was in the South Pacific. I was in South East Asia. He went to Australia. After they'd wage a campaign then they'd had to go to Australia or New Zealand to get new equipment, to retrain, to take a break, to get replacements and all that, until they could get up to full strength and they they'd get on a ship and go to another campaign. So he and I shared a lot of the same feelings about life also that had I never gone into the Marine Corps I would not have known that part about my dad. His best friend, I still, when I go to the Marine Corps Birthday, Sponnie's [Rowland Sponsellar, Ralph's Father's best friend] usually there, and we still talk about war stuff. If you go to a, even a lot of these gatherings there were, they are people who are in the military who were never in a war because we don't have wars all of the time. There was 5 or 6 or 7 years between W.W. II and Korea. There was 10 years between Korea and Vietnam. Since Vietnam we've had a lot of skirmish type stuff, but never anything that lasted more than a couple of months. And it makes a difference if you've never, if you've been in the military. Maybe you were stationed in Hawaii or England or somewhere and you were a soldier or a marine or an airman, but you were never in a war. And it makes a lot of difference. And you have to, I mean I don't ever put down anybody. If I could do it all over again and choose, I wouldn't have been in a war either. And most people who were there would

choose the same way. It just makes you different. It makes your outlook different, and it's just because of the war, just because of being in the war.

The luxuries that I was talking about that we have over here, the showers that we had in Vietnam consisted of a 55 gallon drum full of cold water. It had a little pipe coming out of the bottom of it, and it was set on a wooden frame. And it was tall enough you could stand inside underneath this barrel and you were standing usually on a skid or a palette of some kind to keep you up off the ground so you wouldn't be standing in mud. Once in a while you could find a shower that they had a heating unit like they had in the mess hall to get water warm in these big garbage cans to wash dishes with or the mess plates, I guess you call them. They were made out of metal, trays, mess trays. Then you could get a hot shower. A lot of times when we were out on patrol and we came to a river and it was a fairly safe area or whatever, we'd go swimming in it, and that was nice, but as far as being able to be clean like I said before we brushed our teeth everyday, no matter what, but shaving and showering and all that stuff was a real luxury. Our restrooms, our outhouses they looked more like outhouses than anything else, weren't even dug into the ground. They had these cut out bottoms of these 55 gallon barrels and then one of the best jobs in South Vietnam was on a daily basis these receptacles had to be burned and the way you did that was you opened the back of the outhouse, pulled these cut off barrels out on the ground and put diesel fuel in them and lit it. And then we let them burn. We called it burning the shitters, which is exactly what we were doing, and it was pretty disgusting. After you were there for a while that particular duty was given to new people so nobody ever had to make a career out of it, fortunately. They were pretty crude as far as that goes. They were practical and they got the job done, nothing like you would ever

want to have in your house. For water, fresh water they had these, they called them Lister bags hanging and if you saw one hanging there on a tripod you would almost, it reminded you of a heavy bag, a punching bag that fighters trained with. They were water that was brought in from a water purification point. Ours was somewhere around Da Nang, I think. They purified the water as much as they could and then they pumped it into these tanker trucks and then the tanker trucks come to the hill and then you had to fill 5 gallon cans out of the tanker truck and this was all done manually, you know. And fill up your water bag, fill up your 55 gallon shower barrel and all that, so having a fresh drink of water was somewhat of a luxury too. In the bush if we got water out of a well or a river or anything, we had to put these halizone tablets, they called them, and shake them up, and I think you had to wait a half an hour maybe an hour, I don't know before you drank them because they were supposed to kill anything that was bad in the water and boy did that taste awful. After a while we were over there and you just didn't care about all that stuff anymore, so you just drank whatever there was available to drink out of and didn't ruin it with those halizone tablets in them. That was probably a lot of the cause for the dysentery that we had. We probably brought it on ourselves.

We had some pretty major diseases over there too. Malaria was one. We were all supposed to take malaria pills every day, and sometimes we did , sometimes we didn't. It got to the point where we said, "What's worse than having malaria? It can't be as bad as running patrols everyday." But people who got malaria then soon discovered that it was worse than running patrols. Malaria was a disease that could stay with you for the whole rest of your life if you got the right kind, But usually dysentery, dengue fever, short term things like that. Flies, diseases that flies carried, things like that. It was just pretty

unsanitary living conditions. And when you got back home and you saw all this wonderful stuff, you know. It really made you enjoy it better and not take it for granted. It's been 30 years almost for me since I got home and I take stuff for granted now and I catch myself and I say, "Remember when . . ." And it never goes away. You don't ever really forget it. I sit here talking about Vietnam, and it seems like I just left there yesterday, or last night. It had been a long time. But it just never goes away. I don't know that it ever will. And I hope it doesn't because I hope I remember. And if this country ever gets into anything like that again, I hope enough of us are around to prevent the same kind thing from ever happening again. Going over and fighting a war somewhere for no reason at all except to make money or the way that whole thing was ran, I mean if you have a commitment or to a country, an ally, a friend to help out there's all kinds of things you can do without having to send people over there to die and I hope and hope and hope that it never comes to that again. I don't think it will. Because whenever you hear them talk about Grenada happened, Kuwait happened, and when the Gulf War happened and all these international incidents that we've been involved with since '75 when Vietnam, South Vietnam finally fell to the Communists. Almost every time you hear a newsman or a newswoman reporting on it they'll compare in some way whatever is going on with Vietnam. They always say we don't want to have another Vietnam. We don't want to get into another Vietnam, well that's true and like I say as long as that stays that way, Hopefully we'll never get into another situation like that again. South Vietnam today from what I know about it all of our allies, all the good South Vietnamese people, all the ones that fought with us and fought on after we left were either killed or taken to camps, and I don't know if brainwashed is the right word,

but they were reprogrammed. The country itself is in the same situation economically as it was when we were there as far as I know. Some of the bigger countries I think, I know the U.S. has some businesses over there now. I don't know what other countries. Japan I believe is one.

And they're starting to rebuild the country, and for a long time because of the prisoner of war deal, people still thinking there were still Americans held over there, which, my own opinion of that there could be. My buddy Cosgrove that got killed over there, the one that used to take the long walks into Da Nang... There could be people over there still. There could be people over there because they want to be over there. I don't know that there would still be prisoners still. I would think that with the Communists backing over there that if there were prisoners they would be in China, Russia, somewhere like that, not actually still in Vietnam. Maybe North Vietnam, but more than likely some other country, not in Vietnam at all. The youngest people who could be prisoners over there would still be 47 years old probably, 46 or 47 years old. People who went over in '73, '74, '75 when it was all winding down and ending, if they were 17 then they'd still be in their late 40's and people, you know from back in the early sixties would be quite 20 years older than that. But there's still some 2300 unaccounted for, 2800, something like that. I always thought that was a really astounding number of people to just leave somewhere without accounting for them, but then you hear about all the people in W.W. I who were never accounted for, and all the people in W.W. II who were just gone. Thousands and thousands of them, because of the, they didn't have helicopters to come out of the rice paddies like we did to get them back to a hospital or they didn't have helicopters to come in if you had men that were killed out on patrol. You buried then,

you didn't leave them, but the big battles and stuff. If people, they'd just, if you get blown up you turn into the old red mist, and you're gone and if somebody's not there to see, I can see how somebody could just be missing even though he was dead. If nobody knew it or was there to witness it or it was at night, but the prisoner situation was the reason we didn't rebuild South Vietnam immediately. After W.W. I we rebuilt Germany, and then we had to fight them again in W.W. II. After W.W.II we went in right away and rebuilt Japan. And they have one of the strongest economies in the world right now. But we never did that in Vietnam, and it was just because of this 10 years of this awful war and the bad feelings that there was by the Americans towards South Vietnam because they won. It was the first war that the U.S. ever lost. Korea wasn't what you'd call a wild victory, but we left Korea in the same situation that we found Korea in. W went there in '50 or '51 and got out in '53 or '54 and basically it was the same country, the same boundaries. Nobody gained anything and nobody lost anything as far as territory. If you don't count all the dead people.

But Vietnam was just different, And I've seen some shows about it, news shows that had, they showed one that was really interesting. It showed the difference between the people in the South and the people in the North. The people in North Vietnam, the regular people, not the government officials or the rich people, but just the farmer people looked exactly the same as they did when I was in Vietnam, but the people in the South all got American clothes on, they all ride motorcycles, they have stereos still. I mean it's just like to see them now on these news reels and stuff it's just like when we were there. I mean they really got into our culture, our way of life, our music. We changed the big cities over there, Saigon and Da Nang and that where there was some wealth and some

educated people, they got into it. In fact they showed street stores, you know, out on the street and they are still selling the same kind of fans that they sold when we were there, the electric fans. Like I say, the stereo equipment, the clothes. I don't think they, I think might have had American cigarettes still, but I'm not sure. But the people in the South even they're supposed to be all one country, Saigon's, Ho Chi Minh city and all that. They remember. So I like to think that maybe our presence there even though we left, and they were taken over by the communists, that they remember what it was like when we were there. And some of the things that we, that they learned from us they still hold on to and think of are valuable lessons in life, if you want to say that. That we affected them in a positive way even though we couldn't, our government couldn't figure out how to win the war. That there was some positive influence there. You have to hope and pray that there was something there that made all those people dying there worth while, even though we lost.